MACMILLAN

MODERN INDIAN NOVELS IN TRANSLATION

Rajee Seth

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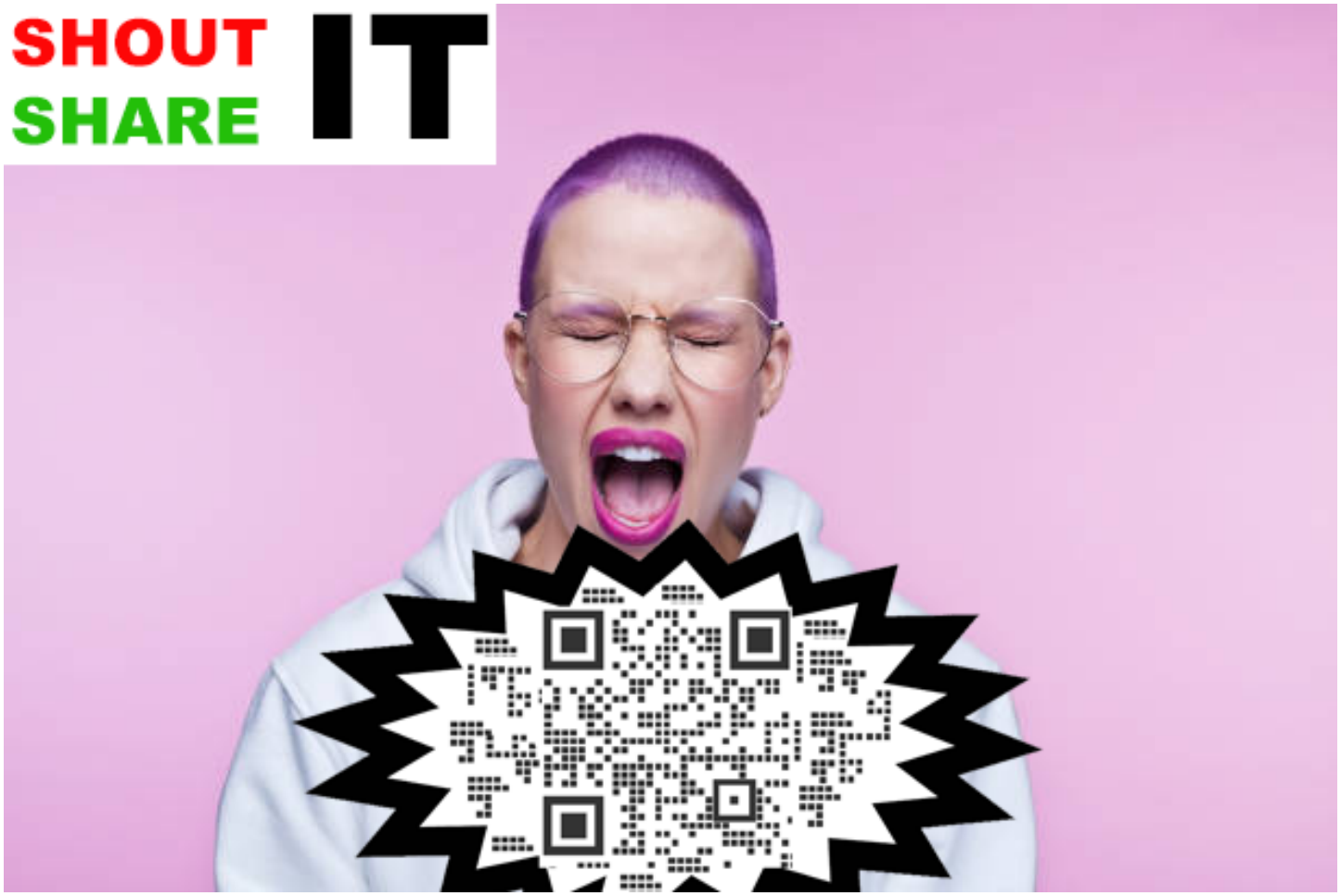
Translated from the Hindi original
by Raji Narasimhan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Clouds hold the water drawn from the ocean,
but it is the clouds to which people look.

– Jnaneshwar

MACMILLAN

MODERN INDIAN NOVELS IN TRANSLATION

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Rajee Seth

UNARMED

(Nishkavach)

Translated from the Hindi original by
RAJI NARASIMHAN

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About this series

Our project of translations, a collaboration between writers, translators, sponsor and publisher has already released 24 novels including this one. The first eleven books were published in 1996 and another seven a year ago. By the end of the century we hope to finish our programme of 55 novels. Our goal is to try and paint a vivid and general picture of Indian life as revealed by serious post-Independence fiction in Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Gujarati, Oriya, Marathi, Punjabi, Urdu, Bengali and Hindi.

Every language represented in this series carries with it a sense of community or place, or of being "located" in a unique sensibility. We hope that the works selected express those modes of feeling, perceiving and believing that relate to one of the world's oldest, unbroken traditions.

With the progress of research, scholarship has moved more and more towards narrower fields of specialization. So this makes a survey of a whole field of operations necessary for onlookers whether or not they are "shareholders" in the enterprise of translation.

Even within India most people do not know the anthropology, literature or history of a linguistic group other than their own. For them, we hope to unseal in English, at least a few works from languages which they may not have the time or ability to learn with the kind of missionary enthusiasm that some people expect everyone to have.

Others, raised outside India, (whether of Indian or non-Indian origin) may need some help with references historical, religious, philosophical or cultural. For those readers we have prepared glossaries because we believe that one way of understanding India is to read the literatures of her complex and diverse regions. I am sure there are more eloquent visions but

if these translations help to widen the literary horizons of our readers even slightly, they would not have been published in vain.

This project has been made possible by the generosity of the MR. AR. Educational Society, Madras. Known to us, there has not so far been a similar programme of translations funded by the private sector.

MINI KRISHNAN
Project & Series Editor

ABOUT THE SPONSORS

When Mrs MR. Omayal Achi and her son Mr MR. Arunachalam died in an air crash on 12 October 1976, the considerable fortune they left behind was converted into the MR. Omayal Achi MR. Arunachalam Trust by their heirs.

Mr A.M.M. Arunachalam is the Managing Trustee, and his three sisters the Founding Trustees of the Trust, the chief functions of which are education and health care in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu, India. The Omayal Achi College of Nursing, Tamil Nadu is also run by the Trust.

Later, a separate body was established called the MR. AR. Educational Society which set up the MR. Arunachalam Vocational Training Centre and the Selva Vinayakar Middle School, all in rural areas. The aims of the Society besides literacy, also include the promotion of Indian literature and scholarship.

Translator's note

I have a theory about translations — that they should never read like original writings. A translation should sound and read like a translation, that is, a rendering in another language. It should have a bi-cultural and consequently, a bi-lingual tone and feel. Language is a powerful and all-enveloping factor in human communication. Even a most innocuous statement, such as, "I fell asleep," sounds different in different languages. The words come with a different bearing on the action they specify. This push of a particular linguo-cultural tradition has to be suggested in the target language. I would, therefore, make allowances for a degree of awkwardness in the rendering. To translate "Kya matlab hai tumhaaraa?" for instance, I wouldn't sternly strike down the literal "What is your meaning?" for the grammatical and correct "What do you mean?"

Editors, alas, are — as they have to be — cautious about such a permissive approach. They have to guard against the eccentricity and unintended hilarity it can result in.

I agree this is a real danger. But a middle path does still exist, I believe, and can be gainfully employed by the translator. The translation must convey the existence of another text. It must wake the reader to the parent text, even if it is in a language he does not know, and therefore cannot read.

I hope I have been able to perform this awakening act in my translation.

An unexpected pleasure for me in this exercise in translation has been the chance it has given me to work and interact with Mini Krishnan, the editor of these translation series launched by Macmillan India. Mini belongs to a species of editors I thought no longer existed. She reads, not just with involvement, but with a ruthlessness that she communicates to you, and forces you to re-think words and deconstruct

them to the core. She is exacting and exhilarating to work with. I only wish all translators had the benefit of an editor like her.

The second person I want to thank in this work of translation is Jai Ratan, an eminent translator himself. Time and again he came up with just the simple and apt word which I needed, and had lost in my myopic entanglements with the text of the original. He was a steadying influence throughout.

RAJI NARASIMHAN

Introduction

The central feature of Rajee Seth's fiction is schism. Form and substance come to it from this feature. The schism is caused by the battle of the ideal against the actual that rages in her protagonists' lives. In which, she says with a mixture of resignation and fortitude, the actual is always the stronger. It is the established order, pervasive and ungainsayable. As against the hard attributes of the actual, the ideal, her argument runs, is fragile. It is a felt and unseen presence. Its space is only the mind of the rebel. The ideal, in other words, is an abstract force in the logic of Rajee's fiction.

But she also makes it clear that the victory that the actual wins is an ugly one. Under the jackboots of this ugly victor, the embryos, ova and cells of myriads of new mores, new ways of perceiving, thresh and flail, straining to take form. They don't die. They swerve and dodge the dread, descending weight of the actual in a doomed, futile clamour. This underground seething and ferment are the vindications of the ideal in her scheme of things.

Mute eloquence versus cocksure, strident, I-say-so's — this standing division of attitudes present in her fiction shows to best advantage in her woman-centred stories. The protagonist of *Sadiyon Se* for instance, burns the letters written to her by the man she was involved with before her marriage to Naren. This erasure is necessary to keep her wifehood to Naren on the immaculate, above-board terms she wants. Such transparency is integral to the committed monogamy that is the basic law in her way of relating to man and to her own femininity. But this creaseless state that she desires is not possible as long as the letters exist, with their illicit, opiate pleasures pulling her into their secret and unsharable world. So she burns the letters. It is a kind of self immolation, an extermination of her bastard self.

But, she realises, the classic ideal of woman as the surrendering wife, is not the dumb, passive state she had thought it to be. It is essentially a creative state. It demands a male figure as singular as the woman's to become operative. It demands, in other words, a chosen man, the right man, the man proclaimed the right man by the nerves, spirit and mind of the woman herself. It affirms the principle of selection, the exercise of the individual will, of a robust give and take matehood.

The protagonist wakes to these nuances of her act of arson, as she stalls her husband's repeated calls to join him in bed. She cannot, in the wake of her letter-burning rite. Time, space and partners lie in a fearful overlap within her from the tempests released by the rite. She simply fobs Naren off with excuses and commonplace female ruses to ward off unwelcome attentions from the husband. Naren, pleading and commanding by turns, drifts into his breadwinner's exhausted and unslaked sleep.

Afterwards, she is ashamed of the cheap trickery she has resorted to. To avow a deeper sentiment she had debased it. Couldn't she have played it straight? Couldn't she have told Naren plainly that she was not upto making love that night? Or better still, with the brash courage of the chaste woman she wanted to be, couldn't she have told him what she'd done that day? For Naren knew about her ex-friend.

It was a double murder of the self that she had committed, she realises. Passing into fitful, conscience-lashed sleep, she sees flash on the screen across her eyes the figure of a woman whose face is like hers, but whose eyes and expression are that of the woman she had killed while busy fooling Naren. The slain woman was herself, the woman she wanted to be and lacked the courage to be, with the transparent, limpid qualities she desired for herself. What she had was a tortured, masochistic chastity.

The story ends there, with the protagonist stretched on the borderline between the actual and the ideal. This line is a natural line of division in Rajee Seth's perceptions.

★ ★ ★ ★

Sometimes Seth crosses this line and attempts a synthesis, an urge which is understandable. It is incumbent in her text. Given the feverish involvement and self-absorption with which she portrays the state of rupture, laying bare its anatomy and chemistry, a movement back from portraying rupture to portraying wholeness is inevitable. It has to take place for the further unfolding for her argument.

But this reaching out for wholeness has to have firmer conceptual moorings than it has now. It has to match the rupture in force and authenticity. Rupture got its present foregrounded position in her fiction after what seems an inevitable outgrowing of the intensities of her first novel *Tat-Sam*.

It is a much-acclaimed novel, and deservedly so but it is free of the feature of split and rupture. On the face of it, it may not seem so. Its protagonist, Vasudha, a young widow, is torn between her idealised resolve to remain a faithful and committed widow to the husband she had loved, and her family's conventionally modern insistence on seeing her married again.

Vasudha's resolve flags when she meets Vivek in the course of meetings with suitors her family arranges. Vivek, a widower, is as doggedly bound to his dead spouse as Vasudha is to hers. Vivek does not reciprocate her feelings. Shattered, she sets out on a voyage to South India and meets Anand, for whom living in the memorabilia of the past is effete. Already converted to this state of mind by the episode and experience of Vivek, wavelengths strike up between her and Anand. Love and fulfillment follow.

Vasudha's evolution from pious, idealised widowhood to full-blooded wifehood once more, is free of even the faintest notes of censure or accusation and the impulse of rejection that rises from these moods. She rejects no one, accuses no one, for the many isolations she has to bear, writ for the woman stepping off the track. The boorishness of middle-aged suitors estranged from their wives (the suitors have to be middle aged and estranged from living, undivorced wives, in a natural balance to her own shop-soiled, second-hand

status) do not embitter her, make her wash her hands off men, the patriarchal order and the types thrown up by it. When Vivek chickens out of his expressed desire to take her home to his widower's digs and just doesn't show up at the appointed hour, she does not rush back to her air-tight, safe, recluse's life, denouncing men and their fickle ways.

Instead, she moves outwards, away from the dark shores of her make-believe inner landscape to the sun-lit and wind-swept horizons of live geography, to known-unknown climes southwards, and the embracing arms of the sea, the sangam (confluence). Anand is the sangam. And like the river that becomes heavier, massed, more "woman," as it journeys to its sea and sangam, Vasudha too gains mass with the weight of serenity as she journeys to *her* sea and sangam. She rejects nothing, no painful encounter, no painful experience, in this travel. Pain is cleansed of pain. It is seen as the other face of pleasure, is positivised in a frenzy of encompassment, and an endlessly expanding sphere of compassion.

The narrative rises to a crescendo of positivism, establishing the sovereign sway of the affirmative, and subsuming the negative. So single-minded is this positivism of Vasudha that it seems, in the end, like amends the writer feels driven to make for the deviant heroine she has created. Deviances and non-conformisms are, we feel, conditions which the writer feels impelled to regularise as fast as she can, by the norms of the stage she was in herself, in her evolution from tradition to modernity.

That stage has moved forward since *Tat-Sam*. *Tat-Sam* was a neophyte's, artless though soulful, narrative of feminine-feminist predicaments, balanced by a happy faith in happy endings. The novel doesn't really explore the problems of feminine isolations which it raises. In many ways *Tat-Sam* represented a cul-de-sac for Seth. Its fervent, though parrot-like holistic roundings off couldn't be articulated a second time. It could only be a one-time performance.

From this cul-de-sac the next stage of her writing had to hack a way out. Hasty non-dualism simply couldn't take any further creative pummelling. The way out did happen. The

later works, mainly short stories, have a distinct, post-*Tat-Sam* identity. Dualism, marked by strife, rupture and division, established themselves openly as major premises in her argument.

This sober separation of the bent of sensibility and its components cannot be sewn and made whole again unless the imperatives towards wholeness are as much driven by necessity as those that brought about the separation and dualism. It is not enough to be intellectually convinced about there being spaces other than schism and rupture. There has to be a sense of lived experience about such spaces in the author's attempts at portraying them.

This experiential fibre is not felt in these attempts. They seem, thus, hearsays, ad hoc and experimental. Take for example, the short story, "Andhey Mod Se Aagey" (Beyond the Dead End). The protagonist here is in a broadly similar situation as the protagonist of *Sadiyon Se*. She is tormented by the separate but uncanny realities produced by an ex-husband and a current husband. Each has his own crudity and sanctioned ascendancy over the woman. Surjeet, the ex-husband, shrugs and grunts when she tells him she didn't want to stay. Didn't want to stay, she said? Fine! Scram! He wouldn't drop dead without her. Women were nuisances he could well do without. For Mishra, boss and current husband, women were necessary props of life. Unlike S, M wants sequence and ceremony in life. M likes his interludes with a woman just as he likes his pre-dinner drink. If S reserves his right to vagabondage, M reserves his to philander. She is not M's first woman — even leaving out the dead wife — nor would she be the last.

M wanted her. So he got her. S didn't want her. So he happily lost her. Where and what were her own likes and dislikes in the matter?

Such a state of de-personalisation, as said earlier, is the natural fictional terrain of Rajee Seth. And "Andhe Modh..." gets its strength from its truly inspired portrayal of this condition. The two men are compared and contrasted with weary cynicism or quiet laughter at male uncouthness and self im-

portance.

But all the strength gets dissipated in the synthesis and resolution attempted by the protagonist. She has her pregnancy medically terminated. The child is Mishra's. But Mishra is not her man. No man is her man. She has to find herself, be herself, without the intermediacy of man. Which means, she realises with shattering logic, that she is a rape victim. "It's a case of rape," she tells the doctor.

It is. We agree. We go along with her line of reasoning. But it is the author's reasoning, not her character's, the agency through which the reasoning has to be filtered that strikes the reader with force. There is just not enough of a mulled-over quality about it, not enough of the fictionalisation that goes on in a writer's unconscious. The momentous act of decisive disengagement with man, and rejecting the subaltern feminine culture bred by custom-based, compulsory pairing with man, is sought to be fictionalised by the flat, off-the-cuff sentence, "It's a case of rape." The story simply collapses under its own weight, perched on this fragile base.

Seth's fiction remains, at the moment, the fiction of rupture, and the double living that sanctioned, endemic psychological violence breeds. The rupture need not be that of woman torn between desire and diktat. It need not be feminist, though its profile is distinctly feminine. The elderly male character who is also a stereotype in her fiction, with his quality of long-suffering and endurance, is feminine, almost maternal in feel — as in *Uske Hissey Kaa Aakaash* (*His Share of the Sky*) or in *Flyover*. In *That Long Bridge*, a story in this category, the ageing father waits with expectant eyes and bated breath to hear the gasp of pleasure from his America-returned son for the cooler he has bought for his tender, heat-estranged overseas skin. He expects the son to be sensitive to the many subtle and entrenched cultural inhibitions about indulging the body that he has had to overcome to get the cooler. In his opting for straight and simple physical ease as against the wretched tenet of dismissing the body and its demands, he expects the son to see the brave hobble he has made from tradition to modernity. He never gets this recog-

nition he craves. The son has got so used to facilities that he cannot see them when they are there. He can only note their absence. The breathless, expectant and unfulfilled mood of the father creates the story almost wholly.

★ ★ ★ ★

All these facets of rupture and dichotomy have come in for powerful, consolidated expression in *Nishkavach*. As a matter of fact, *Nishkavach* has been foreshadowed in some earlier stories. In *Amoort Kuchch*, (*A Vague Something*) for instance, we see the same triangular grouping of brother, sister and brother's friend as in the first part of the novel. In *Amoort Kuchch*, as the title indicates, the sexual attraction between the sister and the brother's friend is sought at one level to be kept in the realms of the unsaid and unsayable. But it cannot be left in those realms for it has become a fact too live and disturbing. It needs a vent. The logic and thrust of the story demand it. Thus the brother is shown rearing up as the censuring male. By instinct bursting to action and triggered by the moment, he acquires the language of constant and cutting reprimand, rebuke, insinuatory and pointedly oblique abuse. That is all. The storm clouds of love — the passion ever illicit — stay arrested at the boundaries of the three involved people's safe and virtuously anti-love middle-class lives.

This boundary is breached in the first part of *Nishkavach*. The love between the sister and the brother's friend is given a freer and more robust expression, as against its low-key portrayal in the short story.

Simultaneously with the higher pitch of expression, the brother and his mother (the sister is a cousin) are shown beset by orthodox, anti-romance furies.

This orchestration of pro and anti-romance modes makes more prominent the place of love in the spectrum of emotions in the narrative. Not that this makes it less of a threat.

The threatening, outcast emotion is duly snuffed out by external and unforeseen circumstances in both the story and Narrative One. In the short story the snuffing out is effected

by the opportune death of the brother's friend. In Narrative One this extreme, immature and ready-made solution to the incursion of love is not resorted to. The sister, Neera, simply turns practical and worldly wise and accepts without ado the overtures of a rich young man fortified by family and a suitable background.

This turn around of character is a well-intuited reading of the locus, or the exact position of love in the Indian sensibility, and its place on a scale of priorities. The locus is not high, Seth says. When the chips are down, and a yes or no answer is called for, love is seen as an abstraction, glowing, mesmeric and as unreal as a rainbow. It has to make way for the real, for forces that make life an on-going affair.

This voluntary rejection that Neera of Narrative One makes is not the defeated, silently censuring and corroding state of rupture that is the lot of the girl in *Amoort Kuchch*. Neera's rejection signifies an adult shouldering of pain, a heroic swallowing of it that is going to smoothen the scissor marks of the auto-surgery she has performed on herself. She is hardened but sap-filled, like the bark of a tree, by the bitter-sweet potion of love she has drunk.

However, it is in Narrative Two of *Nishkavach* that the theme of rupture breaks out of feminist bounds and determinisms, and expands into a very contemporary, multi-layered geo-cultural divide. Sexual love transmutes into love for the mother. The mother-figure becomes a surrogate for the motherland. Set against this is the brittle but dynamic figure of the American girl, Martha, corresponding to the brittle but dynamic culture of her country. The first person protagonist teeters between the two women, the two sets of emotions they arouse, and the two kinds of existence, aspirations and values they represent. He opts for the second model, as he has to, considering the spirit of the age and the times he lives in. Disregarding the revulsion he has for Martha, a revulsion physical and spiritual to the point of nausea, he severs the link with mother, motherly solicitousness, and motherland, and leaves the shores of his country for the second and final time.

This second farewell he bids, despite the violent intensity of his enmeshings with his mother, is one of heavy, melancholic disenchantment. And it is in our unravelling of this haunted mood of the protagonist that we see the full range of the author's command over her theme, and the controlled endings that she effects.

All the family members of the protagonist are lined up behind him, singing three cheers for the brave new world across the ocean, and their brave promising lad headed there. There are no negative notes here, on this near-sacramental occasion of the rite of passage he is making into god's own country. Even the mother, who was on the verge of a breakdown till just the day before, maddened by a sense of loss and doom, has turned passively accommodating as she joins the send-off ceremony. If she had stayed actively opposed to his going he would have had the standard pain of leaving a loved one behind, and the theme of rupture would have unfurled to standard proportions.

But the mother is shown transcended of the need for the son's physical presence. She has learnt to summon the feel of the son by mind and will power. For the son, the greedy joy of the rest of the family at having a kinsman as their importer of fabled American pleasures, is a bearable pain, not unexpected. But the mother's cold austerity and ruthless weeding out of attachments make him an exile for life, the kind of exile in which there is no room for the contentions of twin loyalties, exile which is not a state of two-sided rupture, but of a dull, deadening and unbroken pain.

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Every translation is a challenge. The text gets re-texted, inevitably and unavoidably. In the re-texting, sinews and joints are differently set. The tensions between narrative and language change: the overtones made by the changed tetherings of narrative and language are different: the whole mass and density of the work undergo change. But somehow, through indefinable inter-linguo-cultural attractions and affinities, a two pronged bi-textual artifact results, expanding the given

nucleus.

In *Nishkavach* to a degree much more than in writings generally, the text is a consolidation and composite expression of the author's way of connecting to life and to its happenings. It is a very close way of connecting, a very intimate, personal involvement that is total and all but an immersion, far beyond empathy. It is from this close, sensory harnessing of herself to life, like a suckling child, that Rajee's narrative tone emerges. It has its own heightening, its own timbre and pitch. So pervasive is it, so strong in feel and presence, that from tone it becomes voice. And voice has face, physiognomy, the power of suggestion. It becomes the persona that breathes meaning into words, into turns of events, invoking the wordless truths behind word-based meanings.

The translator's task, ideally, is to record and reproduce this voice in his or her language. One of the axioms of translation is that this ideal can never be realised : the re-rendering is never a faithful copy; it cannot be. It can only be an approximation of the original, a sonorous evocation of it, if it is a good approximation.

In Narrative One of *Nishkavach*, for example, there is the scene of the three young people in a dance session. Seth strikes a frank and very contemporary amoral tone of sensuous enjoyment here, which is also self-conscious. The absence of prudery and the liberation from the don'ts which marks the narration here, we feel, is being observed by her too, by her own self, looking over the shoulder of her writing self. When seen against the extreme isolation and introspection that so often mark an Indian woman's growth towards such sensuous innocence and moral neutrality, this narcissism seems natural and permissible. The narcissism merges into the narrative, and makes for a culture specific contiguity of author and author-as-spectator, that compounds into a culturally viable narrative tone. The most striking outcome of this sub-conscious process of dissembling and re-assembling is the free use by her of Indian musical terms to describe Western pop music.

The English translation, ideally, has to reflect this process

and the various stages in it — a task next to impossible. The culture specific pitch of voice resulting from the equally culture-specific separation of writer and writer-as-spectator are hard to register in English. The only thing that I as translator could do was to forget this whole process. I had to be content with fitting the Hindi musical terms the author uses to straight-backed and severe English approximations and leave the rest to the sounds and substance aroused by English.

"Dhamaadham goonjtee ththaapeyn." "Ha-haraatee laya kaa udhaam aarohann.."

"The thunder of the beats. The possessed upswing of the rhythm..."

I had to clip the language. The space and range of the vowels get pulled in, in the clipping, causing the imagery to rise swiftly from the heart of the words, on the heels of the utterance. This trim, spare-bodied version with its abrupt terminations competes with the vowel-rich, onomatopoeically lush and distending narrative of the original. The two sound systems, short and long, staccato and fluid, strike the ear alternately, or in a patterned medley like church bells, from the exercise of translation.

Take, as another example, the tear-soaked and intense scene between mother and son that occurs in the closing sections of Narrative Two. The mother worship of the young man is very difficult to convey in English, which is not particularly hospitable to emotional excesses of an unbroken high pitch, except in Shelley's poetry or Elizabeth Smart's special genre of poetic prose.

In Hindi the hyperbole rings true. Language and sentiment buttress each other. The intimacy between mother and son does not suffocate but spreads horizontally, its overtones homing in into an acceptive cultural enclosure. A tremendous advantage of the Hindi is its feature of genderising the verb. "Kahaan jaa rahee ho?" the son asks the mother. In the feminine verb "jaa rahee," read in context, a whole lot of emotions and sub-emotions quiver, animating in the reader's mind the epical pulses of the mother-son relationship.

Compared with this, the English "Where are you going?"

is flat, shorn of drama.

Once again, the translator's approach has to be that of skirting the aural and vocal traits of the original and leaving it to the inner vitalities of the target language to raise, shape and shade what it will. The chairoscuro, as expected, does a great many things together. It surprises. It belies anxieties. It becomes a pale imitation of the original, and at one place, even appears to score over the original. To the son's question "Where are you going?" for instance, the mother answers "kaheen naheen." The English "nowhere" charged as it is by existentialist usages has an impact here, a hard and condensed sense of ultimacy.

As if in a hurry to cancel this ascendancy, the English sinks to total inadequacy in "... (Maa) apnee chchaati per zor sey haath maarkar apnee 'mai' ko dikhanney lagtee hai..."

The gesture of striking the breast that the mother makes is cultural behaviour of the most basic, grassroots kind, coming with its own mimetic fall out that makes speech null and void. The Hindi, accordingly, wears the power-packed words with effortless ease and lubricated muscular coordination. But the English has to content itself with a verbal likeness, without reverberative force. "She thumps her breast to show me her 'I'..." It is so unlike the Hindi in tone and spirit, so against the grain of English too, that its very unintegrated nature gives it away as the product of another culture, and hence, untranslatable. That is the only alibi the translator can hope to offer.

Interestingly the English parallels the Hindi too, at many places, and settles into a second text that hums with the aftertones washed into it from the first text.

"The moment stays frozen. Like my hand on her head," seems a close yet distinct translation of "kshan thithak jaatee hai, jaisey maa key sir par mera haatth." The breaking of the sentence in English is only an emphasis of the pause after "jaatee hai," that the reader naturally makes. Or, "The sky empties. Vacant. Fearsome," for "Vyom khaalee ho jaatee hai. Ekayak. Soona. Daraavna." The vowel lilts are irreproducible in English. But, pursuing the analogy of music there always does exist a counterpoint to a note. The translator's endeav-

our is to seize this counterpoint in the phonetics of the language into which it is being rendered, and work out an extended dimension to the text that is given.

The counterpoint may differ from translator to translator, depending upon the pitch and timber that one is subjectively prone to hear in the original text, over and above those hummed out objectively by its phonemes and culturisms. Such subjectivities notwithstanding, the method of playing it by the ear does seem the best method to this translator.

RAJI NARASIMHAN

Dedication

For rahul

Don't you hear
How much they speak
These walls?

NARRATIVE ONE

For me everything has stayed just where it was.

The view from the window at which my table stands is the same. The same dome of the temple of Shiva, tripping up the sweep of the eye. The same banner fluttering on it, discoloured by the fury of the sun. By the side of the temple, the same bungalows. Over them, the same vines and creepers swaying to their own urge; and lying at their feet, like a black python, the road. Farther to the right, the sandy expanse of the river breaks in abruptly, putting the fields around in a perpetual shimmer and haze.

Everything is where it was. Like a picture set in a frame. Mine is the only presence which is not part of the picture. Leaving behind the musty corridors of the college hostel, I am seated amidst these objects, to prepare for my competitive exams.

Seated just as then. Against the same window on the first floor. Under the circle of light of the same lamp. Seated bolt upright on this wooden chair, dozing and waking, reading and making notes, I feel I have become stuck to my chair and grown roots into it.

But for her?

For her how fleet-footed life has been — a life that has run and leapt, taking in in its long-jump three whole stages of growth. Under my eyes she has become mother from child, and the guardian of a growing life.

What would she be feeling?

I try to imagine it. But it doesn't shape out. The reek of maturity associated with motherhood does not film over her innate sparkle. In this whole happening, did her innermost likes and dislikes play any part? Or were they given a waiver?

Perhaps if she had really had her way she would never have submitted to this burden.

She would have kept intact the halo of completion that blazed about her from her nearness to Raman. A year and a half. What's a year and a half? And of it nine months...

"You could drop her a letter." Mother comes in, saying this and leaves, taking out some clothes from the cupboard, tying me to yet another peg.

I pick up paper and pen. But my hand does not move. What ought I to write? That I am happy? Or that I feel odd? Or that all of us, mother and father and myself, are happy? No, no. Far more apt it would be to say, "You are at last really grown up. Big. My congratulations, from the heart."

Words sound hollow. Laden with noise. Bereft of bounce and flow. If vibes don't take off from within me, how can any reach her? My writing would be futile. Actually, she wouldn't even be expecting a letter from me. Was there ever any give and take between us? Was any togetherness ever born between us, the most natural thing that there could have been at that time? We both slept in the same room. Entered and exited from the same door. We were both subject to the same routine. But...

Why have I always been neutral about her? I have not understood it to this day. As my maasi[1]'s daughter, she abruptly made her entry into our house. I was then in the seventh or eighth class.

I was happy and contented enough in my state of singleness. A companion did not make me particularly elated. No acceptance. No rejection. Nothing from me. Perhaps by that time my course in life was set. My hobbies and inclinations had unfurled to their full range, found their focal points. No bridge of tastes ever grew between us.

Her bed was put in my room. She began going to school with me, began having her meals with me. Heaven knows how, from what new-found ardour, mother began actively orienting me to her. All on her own she decided that I had the need and liking for her companionship. If I did not respond with matching zest, she would get angry. Why couldn't Neera go to play badminton with me? What bother was it to take her swimming with me, when father had

enrolled her in the club? Why didn't I involve myself in what interested her, in the development of her ideas? I was older than her, wasn't I?

When I think back, in my world there really was no place for this incursion. Nothing was clear in my mind, either about my rights over her, or my duties to her. Mother scolded me. Lectured to me. Deprived me. She wanted to, and did snatch from me my exclusive privileges as her son and invest Neera with them. I don't ever remember mother scolding her in any hurtful way. And I never really fathomed how vulnerable to her scolding Neera was.

I wondered why mother was acting thus. She wanted to level all the five fingers of the hand by stretching and pulling them. Can this ever be possible? Has it *ever* been possible? And all this, suddenly. Midstream. Without rhyme or reason, without forewarning.

Maybe this was her only way of gaining self-esteem, for basking in self-admiration at her fair play. What a warm, compassionate woman she was, she must have thought! Giving shelter to a waif. A woman ruthless with herself, with her natural affections. How many women do this? So many turn crude in the effort! Natural relationships can be unshown, stay alive within. But adopted relationships have to be shown, exhibited, made overt, she could have reasoned.

These latent forces could also have given spur to my bland, neutral attitude to her. On her part, she drank the shower of my mother's motherliness upon her with open relish. Snuggling into the coquetries of turning child from adult, she minced, drew increasing attention to herself, glided up centre-stage. I was labelled "wiser than my age," and shoved off my place. Actually, even while doing this to me, my parents were congratulating themselves at having given birth to a mature child like me. I was an example. I was unique. "Honestly, what exceptional poise this lad of ours has! Neither stubborn nor naughty he is..."

Of course any stubbornness or naughtiness from me would have upset them tremendously, upset all their nice theories about me.

Whether these things did really put undue weight on me, I do not remember. Perhaps I wanted things that way. Friends in unending lines bore me. Probably this boredom is mutual, for my friends still brand me 'choosy,' and wouldn't really think twice about dumping me. Apart from Bhaskar in Allahabad and Basu in Delhi, I have no close friends. Aloneness does not bother me. Rather, I get restless if I am denied it for any length of time.

I stayed a loner even after her coming. Neither before she came, nor after, did I experience the supposed agonies of aloneness. The agonies rose more than anything else from the rod in my mother's hand, the rod that knew no discretion.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Now she does not live in this house.

Now she lives in the house designated 'hers.'

After my M.A, and then law examinations, when I returned home she suddenly looked grown up. Fleshed, rounded, quick of temper. Mother said girls matured early and overnight became fit for marriage. Inquisitive, I asked Neera one day, "You think it's all right, all this marriage and so forth, so soon?" For me it was unimaginable. None of my peers or acquaintances were ready for this plunge. The main thing for us was direction, and the search for it. How could anybody jump into this ocean called marriage, an ocean uncharted, with no routes of return?

My question made her reflect.

"Sometimes it seems an unnecessary bondage, yes. But then I feel it would be very good too. There would be somebody I could call fully my own, at least."

I was stunned. She was calling us all names. Especially mother, who in her eagerness to be mother to her, was virtually pulling out each hair of her body. She wasn't looking for responses from me, but was sunk in self-pity.

"Strange, isn't it, that in this vast, wide world nothing is yours. Only yours, and no one else's, no half measures. It's killing."

A shred of intense unhappiness swept over her glowing cheeks. Seated before me, she looked as she had never before looked to me — inward, in a ferment, sad. I said:

"Why, there's aunt, she..."

"Unnhnn."

She stopped me midway, groaning. "Don't speak to me of my mother. For her I am nothing. Dumped me when and where she wanted to. Taken cover in glib talk about "educating" me.

"You are wrong. I have heard that for your sake she gave up all chances of happiness. She could have married again."

"She's not badly off for all that. All those sweet school girls in their frocks and ribbons give her all she wants: flit around her the whole day long. That kind of thing is beyond me. You don't know how two-faced, how multi-faced, these baby-faced little things are. Arch flatterers. Know how to feed her ego and get the best out of her. Mother is a toy in their hands. Let me tell you something..."

She slid up close to me from the other end of the bed, confidential, secretive. "You know, she never seems like my mother to me. I keep yapping, and she never takes in anything. Just sits around bent over her copy books and pen. And jaws away with those chhokris[2]. I've never for a moment felt one with her. I wish, I wish, I too had a mother like yours..."

"But you do. She's your mother too." I was overcome.

"No! She's *your* mother, not mine. An aunt is only an aunt."

Its outline blurred her face seemed to dissolve. I grew unsteady. All this while I had known only of *my* pain in *my* nerves.

What a puzzle it was. I give over and lose my mother to her, and my mother doesn't seem her own to her. But in that hour I was fully with her.

Heaven knows how she had drifted to this point. For the first time she had spoken to me in this intimate, confidential and slow way. Mostly she had an impatient, tit for tat look on her face, loaded with contempt for relationships.

I am thoughtful.

I think now, what brought her to this point of intimacy with me, even if only momentarily? In not letting this bridge to come up more, was I guilty somewhere?

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

She went to 'her' place, her sasuraal[3], but it still felt as if she was here, in this house. For this reason or that, within the circle of mother's anxieties. Tied to us by God knows what unbreakable ties of kinship. In the days when I was away in Allahabad for my M.A. examination her relations with mother deepened. I was a figure on the fringe. For one thing I was a proclaimed non-speaker. And then, there was the load of my examinations, one after the other. Trapped between the brute reality of examinations and the beckoning of my dreams, I lived in the house but not really in it.

"All right, you tell me. Someone should go, shouldn't one? I can't. I've just been at her delivery." Mother lays out her problem as soon as she enters the room.

"Should go where?"

"To her. She's had an operation, don't you know? There's a letter from Raman."

"What operation? Whose?"

Mother realises her oversight. Nobody but she as yet knows the whole story.

"What shall I tell you. In her chest... I mean, in her breast. A tumour had formed. Full of pus. They had to cut quite deep."

"Cancer? Is it?" I tremble.

"Naaannnhh. What cancer? Often happens this way. Probably didn't breast-feed the child."

Mother pulls herself up, embarrassed at this explicit speaking. But her pulse of anxiety for Neera would never stop throbbing. It is confirmed when father comes in.

"This is the fad now," mother intones, laying father's breakfast on the table. "Do you know why and how this has happened? Because breast-feeding is bad for the figure, if you please..."

I cock my ears.

"As if the figure won't spoil now, with all this chopping and stitching. Slaves to fashion, these girls are, and they do themselves out of life."

Things grow clearer in my mind. They link. I see the clay of which she is made. Avid and lustful. Lick life, chew it and fling it aside. Vigilant and hawk-eyed about personal interests. This consuming lust of hers frightened and unnerved mother. She couldn't wait to marry her off — "yellow her hands" — even though she understood the supreme value of self reliance for Neera, given the circumstances in which she was placed.

But the feat of endurance that studies were, did not interest Neera. And there was I, in direct contrast. Done with one set of books I lost myself immediately in another. Only context and subject changed. For me, my boat of learning always cut loose from the narrow straits of textbooks to the broad waters of free learning.

She often sat in the yard, feet soaking in a basin of water. She would wipe them. Then cream them. Then massage her face. Then straighten her kameez, look into the mirror, then lie flat on her back on the bed, placid, collected again, gazing up at the ceiling. Not like me, and my jumpier ways of coping with restlessness. I would hop from one book to another, and from that to a third. And from the third to the diary. Then back to the book again, then copy book, then puzzle, then stereo. Seeing me flit around like a fly she would look at me mockingly. A thin smile seemed caught between her lips, and suggested on her face. And then, sitting up on the bed, legs dangling, both hands under her chin, her eyes would dart to and fro with every movement I made. Such amusement in her look! So unhurried her whole being!

Often she would absent-mindedly pick up a book of comics, or some other book, and begin to read. She would grow absorbed. But this absorption never drove her into deeper absorption. She would put the book aside with relief and finality, as though in need of rest after an unwanted task.

Why wasn't she ever possessed by the restlessness that kept

her peers always on their toes, raring to go?

She kept herself untied and free-flowing, as though in readiness for a happening, a miraculous happening. This thought strikes me only now. At that time, to see her flopped around gazing up at the ceiling, or dangling her legs used to make me mad.

"I get you so many books from the library. Why don't you read?"

My shrill questioning voice brought a tart rejoinder from her: "I won't read. Won't. Why should it get you into a flap? I get marks by the bucketful"!

"Marks you can get from learning by rote, too. Isn't there something called 'knowledge' over and above 'marks'?"

Her face — unchanged, stubborn, smug. Twirling the sharp point of provocation at me. "All right, all right, that'll do. You go chew books if you like. I... when Basu comes I'm going to play shatranj[4] with him."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Uf-f-f-f

Basu...Basu...Basu...Basu...

But for me too Basu was the anchor. Just he, no one else. In some sunny hour he had set off impulsively in my direction and sought me out. The credit for this seeking was his. For me, he was always the extraordinary man who could silence my arrogant dismissals of men: "Not this one," "Not that one either."

He was — just was: like the thousands of free-wheeling objects in the cosmos, that can break into some familiar orbit in their own time, to gain completion and thus illuminate the oneness of things.

Who was the drawn party in this play of mutual attraction? I or Basu? Why should a man like him have been afflicted at all with the psychic dilemma of finding a soul mate? He could stay alone. I could, too. But between his aloneness and mine there was a difference. I was unformed, restless. He was fully formed, whole and self possessed. I kept myself bound by a

sequence of preoccupations, from one to another, and then to a third, and thus made myself secure, well-defined and fenced against aloneness. He was unsequenced, gypsyish and liberated. Wherever he was, it was complete. He was both himself and of the environment, always. He had rights of entry into every group: the goons of Balliya, and the devotees of Beatle-song. Hippies and Harekrishnas. Front benchers and back benchers. All. In the midst of all he could keep his self untouched. How was he to be provoked or taunted? Where was the chink or the weakness for it? To reach his mind, you had to submit to the closest and sharpest scrutiny by him. And this screening was empty of assurances, was dry and unpromising. Whoever was proof against this stony harshness, he alone touched the core of Basu's being.

I don't know why I am blabbing away so obsessively about him. Is he so palpable, so present in my mind, that he can transform his absence into an all-pervasive presence?

After those years, which I shall be talking about soon, I had not had any news about him.

For two full years. And then last week on page three of the *Express* I saw his photo. The leader of the cycling team bound for Kanyakumari from Delhi. I was not surprised. The team must have been his assemblage. He has the energy for it. And because of this energy he has a compelling revolutionary charisma. Seeing him do things like this makes me think that his deathless energy was better dead. It would be for his own good. It would make him normal.

Of course we argued interminably about why we favour the normal and the ordinary so much. About why we resist the extraordinary when eventually it is the extraordinary that drives us.

"Do you know why we do this, Vishaal? Why we resist the extraordinary, the uncommon? Because it proves us defunct. Wanting. Throws us overboard."

What surprised me is that I escaped being scorched by the heat of his ardour. At our very first meeting I felt that he was a necessary part of my own being. I could place this abstract

and yet not abstract silhouette of myself before me and comprehend the nature of my fretting. Without effort I attained self-hood and also reiterated *his* self-hood. I had conversations with him that seemed to me had lain dormant within me for centuries. If they did not wake now in his catalysing presence, they would never would wake, for they were not thoughts and ideas of any obvious, everyday use.

The surprising thing also was that we were made of such different clays. I skinny, touchy, irritable, introvert and sentimental. While he, a man among men, muscular, free and self-composed. The exact opposite. Our relationship, like the clear and unambiguous tension of a rope fastening two poles. A natural acceptance of each other. Free of artifice.

Where did he get this courage from, courage that touched danger, dare-devilry? I never did understand. Sometimes I quizzed him about his parents, thinking that that was where the roots lay. But he told me off without mincing words.

Told me in no uncertain terms that it was meaningless, sniffing around there. No estrangement there, but no hur-

dles of over-attachment either. He wanted no crutches, he said. From anyone. Neither from his personal background nor from his family, nor from his father's standing, nor from the countrywide acclaim of his elder brother's barristership. From the readymade perks of patrimonial bequeathals he wanted to be safe. So then? Where did it all come from? From sources within? Was it, then, autogenic? Or was it earned by his own efforts? Avid as I was to know, I couldn't. My hands flailed in the dark.

He was the first person who made me want to retrieve the word "spiritual" from the garbage heap to which I had consigned it. The origins of that unusual inner strength seemed to rise from this magnet within him. I was driven to comprehend him. For the first time I was able to distinguish between spirituality and religiousness. Otherwise, with years of study in history, science, politics and economics, I had consigned to the shelf all intangibles and abstractions, and was filled with vain self-satisfaction at having done so. Not that I had merely tossed aside these notions as counterfeit coins.

The cheap thrill of flinging down counterfeit coins and hearing their empty, tinny sound, was not something of which I was free.

Seeing him, I felt there existed forces that were not placeable within the known and the familiar. He had an uncommon, invincible, larger-than-life quality which expressed itself internally as strength, and externally as joyful abandon. It was not external really, but internal, and therefore to be sensed, not seen.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

What follows might seem out of place. But in the stream of my memory now, it flows unimpeded. I do not want to impede the flow. I will not.

My father had persuaded me to opt for History in the postgraduate examination, because one could score better in History. The pressure to pore over books and burn the midnight oil too came from him. In a veiled way. Steering clear of the whine of sermonising, keeping well in mind the quick and dismissive reactions of our generation, compulsively anxious about the chances of my selection in the IAS examination. The ripples and tremors of a long-cherished dream kept his face suppliant.

If he could have, he would have made a capsule of all his capacities and forced it down my throat, happy at the tonic he was administering to my intelligence (which he thought had become sluggish). I suppose I should have been as involved in all this as he was.

Basu was utterly silent about these goings on in our family. He'd begin eating his meal in a fierce and concentrated way whenever something broke out at the dining table, where it usually did. I knew what an elaborate act he was putting on to keep himself from getting involved, from throwing a stone in the calm waters of our family — calm and happy by the world's standards.

For my mother and father he was my sole, inseparable friend. All that they could not bring themselves to say to me

for fear of my irritable, fragile tolerance, they would say to him — their conduit and mouthpiece. In a polite, respectful way he would hear what they had to say, and off-load it all on me, in practically their very words.

I'd feel insulted by this loyal transmission. "But what do you say? Don't you ever have anything to say to me about me?"

"Leave these things be, Vishaal. If you don't have the strength to stand outside it all ... I mean, if you are meant to grow as a vine why alienate the tree? You are their darling boy... the very answer to their prayers! Don't think I'm finding fault with you. What I do is not what I expect others to do. Yours truly is alone. He can pluck a mountain — he has practically nothing to risk except maybe his fingernails. Laughing? Laugh. You probably feel that this is a fool's philosophy to have formed about life. But what the hell! There are millions wanting to be like the guy next door. Not that it means I want to be Jack the Giant-Killer. All I want is to hear myself say 'boo' to life."

I said to him, "All right, say 'boo' to life," but what did he really want to do?

"Just what I please. Precisely why I don't allow anyone to enter my space. Just think. All these things — I mean love, home, tenderness and all the rest of it — how spineless and sissy they make a man. I think that the tendency to build a house and huddle under its roof must have risen in man when, despite his splendid gut courage, he reached out, instead, for these other things, these baubles. He must have wanted to belong, be like the guy next door. And look how our films have cashed in on this mental flab of ours. If they want to depict a man cornered and helpless they show his mother or sister or daughter seized by the baddies.

"And they script this trade-off with glee and no holds barred, because they know how vulnerable a man is there, how ready to make a deal. Whoever wants to hit at our being rape our women. All these are the curses of the home-and-homestead culture, each more suffocating. Can't a man save himself from this dance macabre, this horror comic? Can't he

keep his strength intact? When you refuse to be trapped..."

His eyes glowed as he said all this. His expression intense, roused and fevered, almost violent. Against whom or what was this violence directed, I used to wonder, seated before him, but was never able to put my finger on it.

Now I feel that I called it violence because I had no words to describe his frenzy to overcome normal human instincts. His words kept striking against the walls of my mind. But words, for all their power, are only words, lumps of earth before the potter. And lumps they stay till the potter shapes them and puts them in the kiln.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

As usual it started at the dining table. Father always came down to separating "real history" from the history of examination papers. Time and again he would unlock the door beyond which lay his own landscape of pain, landscape come up from his share of The Great Pain — The Great Pain of Partition. His narrative always took him to the same point. He could never have reached it so instantly each time if the pain had not been lodged so close to the surface. "It's different now, the wounds healing. But the history behind the wounds was ours, only ours."

God knows how, but the wounds that he said were healing would open again without warning, and begin flowing afresh. He would look suppliant suddenly, pleading, hands stretched out helpless in the brutality of history, and smoulder afresh in the flashback of memory — hands made limp by the catastrophe of displacement. The sobbing beneath this frenzy surfaced again and again. And lingered. How did he backdive over the years and land at the very same point again and again? For how many more mind-years could the comely goddess of memory keep in storage the special claims of the sufferer?

That day too he began his discourse without apparent reason. Like a yellow fog, a silence settled over the table, above the traffic of plates and containers. Everybody went into a hush — mother, I, Basu and Neera.

Only father spoke. The onus of releasing the moment he had made captive was upon him, whichever way he chose to do it.

"One thing I'll say," the wounds began their ooze again. "We may forgive the religious maniacs of this country, but the Englishman, never. No matter the bounties he has showered upon us, bounties vast and magnanimous that have given us our paradise on earth, — electricity, water, rail, telephone — the works. But the civilised enemy's attacks are also civilised, subtle, don't forget. He released us from our political slavery all right, but left behind mental slavery. Now we fester and breed and die in this slime like worms. We'll rise above this slime only if we have vision, a dream that goes beyond the stink. But we have no dreams, no means of flight into action. For action, we sing our nursery rhymes of gratefulness unendingly, hauling ourselves back to the same colonial sewers, again and again. It's the sewage waters of slavery that are feeding our roots. And not a thought do we have for it..."

"O stop now, just collaring the children everyday."

Mother.

"Collaring them? Listen. I want this pain to pass into them fibre by fibre. It is their patrimony. They have to deal with it. It's their responsibility. But responsibility? And dealing with it? They've no ears to listen with. All they say is, 'you want to hole yourself up in your past, all right, go ahead. It's all right by us, but we'll have our good times.' Can anyone say, looking at them, that the generation that begot them was the victim of a holocaust? All right, forget our loss of property, consider it a donation given to the freedom fund. But these clouds of slavery enveloping us, clouds without clouds, what about them? Why is nobody alive to this shame? That is the thing I want to talk about, collar them about. And I want to say, fight it. Fight that state of mind on a war footing. And do you know what kind of a war it will be? When our slavery of the mind stands outside us? In confrontation? When we shall no more be susceptible to the siren songs of gratitude and creature comforts? Our perspective will change.

Jallianwalla Bagh and the soiling of our sensibility will cease to be shrugged off."

"But Papa..." A single, persistent question fluttered in my mind. I asked: "All these dreams of world brotherhood that we have, how shallow they seem considering these feelings of revenge too that we have. Revenge can poison minds generation after generation."

Papa's answer was clear. "I say unambiguously that I do not consider nationalism a lapsed cause in the vogue of internationalism. That is at best a nice principle, call it a noble sentiment if you like. Of course it gives you your alibi for not doing anything for your country. What do you say, Basu?"

Was Basu's answer right? Chin held in the interlock of his fingers, he was sitting at the table, facing Papa. The same inscrutable, bland face, and steady eyes...

"Listen, uncle. In your... I mean your generation's mind... the Englishman is a figure of hatred. And if from that hatred you wish to work up patriotism, you are welcome. Whatever your reasons for thinking this way, I have nothing to say. But I consider your grief and rebellion irrelevant. Why should our generation be prisoners of your history? If your history is not our memory, it is not. For us our world begins from where we begin. You can't keep harping on your pains and load our awareness with them. We can't carry your chip on our shoulders. In any case, all that you say and want, *he* can do," he indicated me. "He is different."

Papa was speechless. I, too, did not like it one bit.

What papa had said was not mere sentimentalism. Were history and heritage only the individual's, Papa's? Individuals were the medium through which the essence of history was filtered. The past shaped the present.

Apart from this, the whole rationale of the distinction that Basu made between me and himself was also jarring. For the sake of being responsible for the dreams of my father, could I really free myself from the destinies of my generation?

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

This was the Basu she grabbed. Under my very nose. Hooked him with the play pieces of shatranj. Left me to be crushed under the avalanche of examinations.

Basu's methods of study were unique like himself. For days on end he wouldn't so much as touch his books. And then he would fall upon them like a wolf, night after night. "But sleep?" I'd ask. And he'd say, "Leave it, yaar[5], this hassle of nights for this and days for that. I can't chain myself to it. Nights are mine. I hold court in the night. Not a bird, not a squeak, in my sway. My reign unfolds at night."

Well, he could shrug off the daily routine. He stayed in the hostel. But I stayed at home. I was, and am, a part of the discipline of the house, the home. I cannot be self-willed like him. Even if I tried. My mind and body have got used to the discipline.

He left his M.A. and went over to Electronics. To the IIT, at that. And further, after passing an entrance test. In two to four months he had got as acclimatised there as if he'd been one of the hordes of its degree-chasing students for years.

And it was at the annual function of the Institute that I met him for the first time. Through a fellow student of mine. It was instant recognition — I felt as though the hunger of years had found its food and was appeased.

The moment Basu came in she would spread out the shatranj board and plonk down in cross-legged comfort. Whatever work was to be done, whether of household or college, she would get through in minutes. *Something* there certainly was, a something that changed the set and drift of her limbs. The languor was gone. The many meanings of life, the many-facetedness of life, which I had wanted to rouse in her through books, had awakened in her. The glacier of animation, frozen within her for I don't know how long, I now saw with amàzement, was melting.

I couldn't say what caused it all. For a girl moving over from the footpath to the middle of the road, it must have been heady, of course. Or was it simply the glow of being in the company of Basu? If that was what it was, it was one-sided, I was sure. What did she know about the many insides of

Basu's inside? Basu was everyone's and no one's. He could make anyone thrown into his company feel exclusive and singled out. But the measureless and inviolable totality of him was accessible only to those who got that far within him. It could never be hers. She could never go that far. The weight of what is sought, after all, depends on the weight of the seeker.

In the beginning it was a relief. My sense of guilt at leaving her alone the way I did, without company, wore off a bit. If her isolation wore off a bit, I thought, let it wear off, by all means, let it wear off more. If somebody else could do what I could not, why not? And in any case she did not in the least invoke the image of woman I carried about in my mind. For me she was nonexistent even while around.

Basu was a pop music buff. He bought the records. And they were played on my stereo, on the sly, in papa's absence, safe from his rage at this din of what he called "cultural bastardy." Mother, by contrast, was always milder, more tactful, about her disapprovals.

Any fast rhythm set off something in Basu. It passed like a current into his sleeping nerve centres. First his feet would start tapping. Then, from the pores of his fingertips the rhythm would erupt as crackling snaps. Then on his North Star shoes, he would rise to his feet, swaying. Sometimes by himself, sometimes pulling me to a synchronising rhythm as I sat ensconced in my chair. We would close the door and dance till the beat trapped in the record had released a maddening counter-beat in our heads. The records would slide down then, as if exhausted by our excess. Then a new record would take over, and the cycle begin again.

It was the hour of dusk. Basu came in hurriedly. "Quick, Vishaal, or your Papa will be on us. Let's play it just once. You can read when he comes."

When the beat started I was sitting in the chair. She was standing against the wall, striking the floor softly with the flats of her toes. Basu was engrossed in trying to touch the head of the refrain, by a thump of now one foot, now the other.

Her being there was nothing new. She was often with us

these days, wanted to be with us. The first time I saw her dance I was lost in admiration. Where had she learnt it? Where had she got this electric intensity from?

As soon as Basu turned up the volume she sprang away from the wall. It didn't take her more than a minute. Calling to him she floated up to the centre of the room, swaying, undulating. Rhythm and motion inter-mixed and flowed so smoothly in the postures of her body that she seemed made of wax.

The small, closed room. I, sunk, in my chair. The thunder of the beats. The echoes rebounding from the walls. And, flowing in the stream of rhythm and lilt, trembling and quivering, the two of them, those two, just those two. The possessed upswing of the rhythm could not draw me even to the fringe of their exultant togetherness, despite the rebukes of Basu's elbows.

When the record finished she slumped down on my cot, gasping, scattering with the force of her exhalations, the rhythm and beats still dancing within her. Drenched, flushed.

Basu held on to the wall, and laughed away, looking at her. Soaked in perspiration. A flood of mutuality was flowing from one to the other, making me an outsider in my own eyes.

"Let me get some water." I said, and slammed the door behind me.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

After this she was more vivacious than ever. She was flowing outside herself. I was the sole witness to this state of hers. For good or bad, both of us were prisoners in the same room. Face to face, within the small area of its four walls, an area in which walls shook if feathers fluttered. A terrifying captivity usurped the right of each occupant to solitude.

But *her* right to solitude? Each thought of her right to solitude came entwined with the image of Basu, and threw me into a morass of anxiety. Did she know Basu at all? Did she have any idea of the backlash likely from the romantic ideas of him that she had formed, cut off from her moorings

as she was?

I wanted to bring all these things home to her, as my right. If it didn't work, well, a couple of hard slaps. But this right that I claimed, a brother's natural authority, where was it? Had I ever earned it? All along I had been nothing if not indifferent to her. I had let her drift in her own stream, orphaned and alone, a leaf torn from its tree.

How was any bridge to be built between us? Would any effort be of use now? I was ready for the exercise, though.

After a lot of thought I went to the market. I had only one means — books. They were for me agents of growth and being. If I adopted other means I would seem a fraud. "Liar" and "Cheat" were her epithets for me anyway.

I bought a whole load of comics, thrillers and best sellers. I was carried away by the task of buying. Standing there, in the market, vividly I pictured her excitement. "Comics! Thrillers. And you!" I heard her saying, voice gone throaty, face creased with disbelief and joy. I had even thought that from my stock of books I would pull one out every day, and place it in her hands, like an offering.

I couldn't wait for the bus. I took an autorickshaw home. She had returned from college and was sitting in the room. I hesitated, the packet in my hand. This magic packet was not to be opened casually. I held it close to my side and tried to edge past her first. The drama cost me dear. The packet struck the corner of the table and fell. I was left floundering. But my predicament meant nothing to her. She was trimming her toenails. She put aside the trimmer, bent over a little from the bed, picked up the packet, performed the polite act of giving it back to me, not the least bit curious about its contents, and went back to her nails.

Her cold complacency. Its chill numbed me. I reeled on the icy pinnacles of self pity. I wished to recharge myself, somehow, with the warm currents of self profusion, and pour down.

"Look! Look here Neera! All this is for you... for you..." I forgot about giving her a book a day. In pathetic agitation I began tugging at the string of the packet. The string wouldn't

give, so I picked up the blade from the table, and hurt my finger in the process.

Freed from their confinement of brown paper and tape, the books spilled out before her in all the ferocious abundance of their consumerist, over-burnished colours.

A sharp gasp of pleasure — that's what I had expected from her. But the gasp came from me, from my throat. She sat detached, unmoved, though she ran her hand over the books.

"Thank you so much," her face was cold and expressionless. "But you know that I don't like books. I like human beings."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The days went by...

I could not contain my worry and resentment any more.

"Don't you know that mother wouldn't like this at all?" I broke out as soon as I entered the room. I wanted it all said and out before being knocked flat by the storm that would choke my vocal chords once it gained passage into my lungs.

"My life is mine. Not subject to any mother." Her face blazed in her effort to tame the leaping waves of fury.

In the evening I caught Basu. Caught him in the courtyard before he could reach the room.

"This can't go on," I was trembling.

"What can't go on?" He jerked his sleeve free of my rough grip. He stared at me, unblinking. His eyes seemed clean to me.

The fight went out of me.

I placed my hand again on his shoulder, restoring what I had roughed. "You wouldn't know, how could you, the hurdles there already are in her life. And then, she is so young, so without understanding..."

"Young?" An ironic smile played briefly on Basu's couldn't-care-less-face. "She is not in anyway young or without understanding."

His decisive, proprietorial tone! I don't know why, I trembled.

He spoke now in a more normal voice. "This is exactly what drives her mad, that she is pushed into the wings with the tags of 'without understanding' and 'too young.' That she's not given importance."

"It is possible, it may be so." I felt defeated. I felt an inner weariness. To do more than this was beyond me and my broody guardianship. Whatever I could do, I had. But on calm consideration it seemed that instead of touching the roots as I had meant to, I had merely shaken the tree. And the tree, tree that it was, went still the moment I left.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

In the days that followed, there was something abstract and undefined in the air, which put me doubly on guard. Was it that I was uneasy about the changing distribution of space between me and Basu?

Earlier, when he came, he would go away cheerfully if I was studying. Or, stretched on my cot, he would read a book. When through, we would see films, play records, or argue — argue away on countless things... on examinations and their use, on tradition versus compromise, on the stubborn rootedness of history, on the generation gap, the great "in thing" then, on the decadence around; on socialism and its practicality. The thrusts of our arguments swung smoothly between far-flung shores. Whatever we said was no more and no less than what had stood the test of each one's faith and perception. We never went to extremes. Each accepted the other's point of view and placed it in perspective. That he and I could never be the same was understood. But the gap never affected our focus of thinking. When he spoke, it was in passionate, and yet firm, tones. But he was also a very good listener. He listened, thought, and absorbed. In my mind, in my life and in my daily routine, he had made enough room for himself to make his absence felt. If he were to go, the space he left would be a gaping black hole.

Had she really spirited him away? If he had been attracted to some other girl I would have been on his side, on his and

his girl's. I would have positioned myself beside him. I would have poured his mind into my eyes and seen with his eyes, liked what he liked. But now...

Now, had my sanskaras[6] awakened? Were they weighing more with me than with Basu? Or was it simply my first hand knowledge that he was inflexible and would tilt at tradition all his life? That he could break ties but not make them and wear them? His carefree ways did not seek meanings from others. And he didn't believe in martyrdom either. It wasn't in him. So why pay court to him at all?

And Neera? Wholly beyond my advice. I had made a small attempt to reach her through books, but it had not borne fruit. I now began to offer her a more clinging kind of affection. In an earlier period she would have welcomed it. Now she thought it a nuisance. She was divided. She would hear me as if standing on a threshold, face towards me, but eyes on the climes she desired.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Mother also got wind of the goings-on. Not yet as keenly as I. But overnight her policy of high-minded neutrality between me and Neera vanished. The moment Neera seemed free and through with chores she would foist some job or the other on her — cutting or chopping or sewing or kneading or knitting. Cautiously. The need for caution kept her busy and yet more busy. Neera stayed untouched, brazen as ever. The game of hide-and-seek went on. Mother would try to tie her up in some chore, and Neera would be on the lookout to somehow turn the tables on her and give her the slip. She often did.

I knew it all. Only I. For only I wanted to know. From the outside it was all peace and good fellowship. Inside, each was strife-torn in his or her own way. Mother cooked away in the kitchen, but her ears cocked for sounds from the room we were in. Neera flopped on the bed, an eye on the door, waiting, expectant. I, book open before me, not reading, seething inside. Only he was at ease, free. Doubts never

assailed him. Nothing disturbed his peace of mind.

But shouldn't he think? Shouldn't he keep the well-being of the house at heart?

What was "the well-being of the house"? Considered calmly, would the heavens fall if someone liked her, or was prepared to be liked by her? Was this such an impossible or extraordinary happening? But then, my worries stemmed from other reasons — reasons that had to with Basu's way of life, his philosophy of life.

Perhaps I could have been on Basu's side, as always. But I couldn't, this time. I was on the side of mother, on the side of home and hearth. I was on the side of security. I thought strictly along run-of-the-mill lines. The reasons could be Neera's paternal history or it could be Basu's life style or both. I was feeling increasingly responsible for Neera, felt more of a guardian to her than Basu was. But I was not able to get this across to her. In the vast expanse of mistrust between us, trust seemed a frail vessel, a boat made of paper.

If she had turned to me the least bit I would, without doubt, have told her something, if not all, of what I wanted to tell her. With love, with fondness and a brother's intimacy. I would have straightened out her sweet kinks. I would have told her, she didn't know into what kiln of fire she was putting her hand. That what he seemed from the outside — friend, pal, intimate, like one's own self — was not all that he was. He was equally uncompanionable, equally uncompassionate, equally stubborn.

The bed creaked. Neera turned on the bed. I knew she had only turned her back to me. She was not sleeping, just as I was not reading in the circle of the lamp where I sat.

She was awake. She was hiding. She was forever hiding. This had become her way now. Then I saw the cast of her shadow sway and move on the wall. I held my breath. She got off the bed and came up to the stool. From the thermos, she poured herself a glass of water and drank it in great gulps. Carefully, she placed the glass back on the stool and began walking back to the bed.

"Is the light hurting you? Shall I put it off?"

"No. Makes no difference."

"If you can't sleep, come and sit down." Swiftly I turned around and dragged the other chair between her and the bed.

"I am sleepy," she declined my invitation.

Abruptly I became reckless, uncouth and direct. "Do you know what Basu thinks of marriage and all that rubbish?"

"I know," she tried to hold down a yawn.

"So?"

"So nothing. He is nice. Makes me feel at home. I've never liked anyone so much."

"All right. Granted all that. But afterwards? There's no future for you there."

She sat calm, and began swinging her legs, a little defiantly. Her face spoke. Through the twist in the corners of the mouth, through fevered eyes. She was not going to bother about action and its result, gain or loss, present or past. Let what was happening go on happening. And in this happening she was to be the prime player.

Her silence gave me tongue. "His life is of a different kind altogether. He can never be domesticated."

"I know."

"His company is going to cost you dear, tax all your patience. And then, look at your own circumstances. As it is..."

"Don't talk to me of 'my circumstances,' she burst out with such fury that I lost my speech. "My 'circumstances' have been the stick for you to beat me with, always. Because of 'my circumstances' haven't I been wrecked slowly through the years? Dumped wherever I could be, whoever...."

A dense and forceful hush fell, like that before and after a dust storm. "If it is circumstances you talk of, then there's no difference between Basu's and my circumstances. I am like him, too. I too have no home."

"He has a home," I cut in. Savagely I flung aside the bricks she had been gathering to build a bridge with Basu. Violence of that red hot kind blazed in me. "What do you think, that he has fought with his parents? He has taken up arms against life all on his own. God knows what power is driving him,

what experiments he wants to make with life, what results he wants. His case is different. You haven't his mettle."

"How do you know I don't have his mettle? Just by what you see?" She was unroused, firm and set within.

Again, she was putting herself on level with Basu, bonding their different clays. It angered me.

"Well, just get this clear. Neither mother, nor aunt, nor papa will put up with your going into a semi-vagabond life with him. So why not think about it while there's time?"

"Aunt and papa and mother have done well enough without me. They will, now too."

"How unkind you are to everyone."

"How unkind everyone is to me."

"You've got wrong ideas in your head."

"Say what you like. Think what you like. It's your problem. I was a fool to imagine you were with Basu."

It was her face, twisted with extreme hatred that provoked me even more than her words. "Basu is my friend. Just a friend. Not my world, not my home, not everything. There are other things beside these, and they need not concern anyone else. And tell me, while we are at it, what does home mean to a man who has 'unhomed' himself? And... and.. you know that there already are blocks in the way of your marriage..."

"That's why... that's exactly why..." she screamed. Teeth clenched, palms of both hands stretched taut at me. The next moment her blazing, heated face came close to tears.

A trembling, beseeching face, shaking, tearful. Seeing my steady gaze upon her, she flung both her hands over her face and rushed into the bathroom.

Did she mean, yes, there were blocks in the way of her marriage, "that's why," "that's exactly why," she wanted to bewitch Basu and put him into her pocket?

How foolish mother was, trying to give her a home.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"From now on, kindly meet your friends outside the house."

Mother came in and flung her ultimatum.

"I'll try," I said this to myself, not to her. And I *would* only try, because it went against the grain of the practice so far followed in the house. Mother too, must have come to her decision after a lot of wrangling within. For what she was asking me to break was something she herself had set up. She it was that had played keen and warm hostess to my friends. As a small boy I used to think it was an overflow of her naturally abundant affections. Later, I understood that this was her way of keeping tabs on me her only son, her insurance for the future. She kept me within sight not stirring from the house. And now, here she was, coming out with this. Turning Basu out of the house, more or less, and denying me full right to its spaces. She was initiating the process of thwarting, scorching, whatever it was that was putting down roots in the house. The gist of it was, simply, that mother, poor mother, was worried, unhappy, brooding.

"Why not write to maasi?" I asked her one day.

"What'll aunt do? If things had ever been in her control, why would she have sent her here at all?"

"Why haven't you ever told me all this family history?" I sulked and pouted, although I knew that it was her blind protective instincts that made her keep me off the unpleasant facts of life.

"What do I have to tell you? The girl couldn't have been kept in a small town. If she was to have a career, she had to be given the right education. And she did not have any other kind of support to fall back on..."

That was when I came to know of the travails of maasi's single woman's life in a small town like Hathras. Despite my vast curiosity, mother just spooned out a few facts.

"Imagine if you can, a pregnant woman robbed and deserted by her husband in the dead of night, locked up in the house and left to the charity and sympathies of neighbours. Why rake all that up? It's just for the past four or five years that the wretched woman has come to some smooth waters in her life. She's the headmistress of the Junior School she works in. Thanks be to Pratap." That was Mamaji[7], my

uncle.

That was also when I understood something of the bile Neera had for little girls. Cunning moppets who could touch the core of madam's inner being through their fawning and simpering, and in return, earn madam's protective indulgence.

"That's all right," mother said, weighing the pros and cons. "If times turn bad and disease strikes, who'll stand by her except these little girls, two-faced as they are? Her own flesh and blood won't budge, no thank you. Unending demands and not a finger would she lift. There were scenes without end between mother and daughter. Of course, in a way this one, Neera too, was hungry for love, she too, yes, but it didn't make for peace and amity. What the daughter wants the mother abhors..."

My fog of ignorance about such things lifted a bit. I wondered why my curiosity about such things always flagged. If and when I did sit down to think about them, they soon got pushed into the limbo of indifference. I never did give her the chance to spread herself out in my mind. I never gave her a space within. I just made myself the spectator and critic of her life.

"All right, all right, now let's forget it all. Why have you got your hangdog look?"

My drooping face upset her. But she continued:

"Outcomes depend on the kind of children one has. I was all along thinking of a good career for her. A career gives a girl her sense of worth, all said and done. Screens her past. Makes it cheerful for the person she gets to be with, too. But as I see it, this one paws the ground more for marriage than for a career."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"I'll try," I had said to myself coolly enough. But I had different plans. What good was hemming and hedging? Far better to have it all out in the open. Heartburn, smoulder, whatever one's due and lot, let it be out in the open. Their

affair had reached only mother and I so far. It would be a different kettle of fish when Papa got wind of it. Papa talked cut and dried. Place the matter before him, and he'd say, say to her once and for all, without mincing words, that she must fall in line, had to. All the vogue arguments of playing it sweet and persuasive, not using force et cetera, et cetera, cut no ice with Papa. Nobody is wholly his or her own, he says. All the four sides of the home have to be well-sealed to preserve the family ethic. No one stands outside or off, no one is exempt.

In any case, what was clear was that after that day at the table he had dismissed Basu as useless. In any debate or argument, now, he stopped addressing both of us together. Whatever he had to say, was for me alone, his able and promising son.

That morning I wanted to — and did — corner Basu in the hostel before he left for class. He paled, seeing me at that hour. I watched him go through shaky, indecisive moments, disappearing within, mumbling something about washing his face, fetching an ashtray.

I stood around, unhurried, untouched. I wanted everything made clear without foreword or preamble. He came out, towel in hand. He mopped his face for no obvious reason. It was far from wet.

This was an evasiveness that was unpleasant and totally new between us.

What a predicament! Did it have to be like this? I, his best friend, not sitting by his side like a best friend, but opposite him like an interrogator.

But this new something, even though I wasn't able to define it, by my mere thinking about it, punctured my rising tension.

"What time is your class?" My voice showed nothing of my turmoil.

"Damn the class. I can bunk it. Nothing important."

What had to be said was still unsaid, held off, hovering in the wings. The awkwardness had deepened and was now highlighting the rank artificiality of our position. Did it mean that we would never again talk away to glory on everything

under the sun? It shook me. I postponed the whole thing to an easier, less itchy moment. I breathed more freely.

"I'm off now. I'll come tomorrow. After my six p.m. class." I had just joined a tutorial college.

It meant he wasn't to take the trouble of coming to my house but was to wait for me here, in the hostel.

He took the hint straightaway. It distressed me. "There are certain things my mother and father can't stand. I won't hide anything from you." Quickly I off-loaded everything onto my absent parents' shoulders, and took up my usual position with him, his pal and mate.

I didn't have the nerve to look him in the eye. I was alive to the nervous, low tapping of his fingers on the bolt of the door.

"I know, I know, I understand... I feel bad, awful." His soft and composed voice disarmed me completely.

"Don't get me wrong," I launched on a preparatory speech, but he was not interested in any speechifying. His mind was heavy already and he wanted ease.

"Look, Vishaal. Neera is very bold. This boldness could be her undoing. I fear it. There is so much she wants. She wants constant attention, constant praise and patting on the back, as though she is not a human being but a package of injuries."

"Wrong," I flared up. "She has never had to bear the sting of her given circumstances at all. She's always been protected, actually, for this very reason..."

"All these things seem false to her." For the first time, perhaps, his habit of listening deserted him. "She has no faith in anyone. She will decide the means of her getaway herself. She wants to test everything herself. And do you know, that's where, somewhere, she makes me a participant. She wants to possess me, body and soul. One day, in fact..."

I pricked up my ears, but he changed his mind mid-sentence.

"To feel the power of having her way she can go to any lengths. I am afraid of her recklessness. Not for myself, but for the sake of you all. That's my true rein. But when she

calls, I have to go. If I don't she strips me to the skin. And the poison and fire she has within her! Stand away a little and think, and put yourself in my place. Forget that she is your sister for a while..."

"Then go ahead and marry her!" The words tumbled out of my mouth, jumping over myriads of restraints.

"Marry her? Me? That child? Find in that child a woman my size? I am... in any case... I mean, you know very well what my thinking on such things is, and the likely outcome of such thinking. It's sheer chance that I was the one there, in front of her, to nab and maul. She could have done it to anyone. She is that desperate to chain and hold. She is in a tearing hurry to grow up and seize control."

"Then... what then..." My head spun with all this low-down on her.

"Leave her be. Let her find her own depth. If she breaks out on her own she may touch shore."

"But..."

He saved me the embarrassment of asking the question I was stumbling over.

"I want out of this morass, Vishaal. I'm none too happy myself. Many of my own calculations about life have begun backfiring. I'm trying to see how best I can make my exit without hurting her."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

But the yogic discipline of staying as water near fire — the mighty ritual of initiation that it is — even Basu did not know. If he had known...

Anyway I sat around, at peace. Cocooned in the pleasant aftermath of my conversations with him. And I ground down with the fury of my retorts the hydra heads of doubt rising up in mother's mind. I flung out like dirty water her wisdom and insights into the dangers of frenzied, hot-blooded youth. I mocked the truth that retorts mirror thought, not life.

"You really don't know him, mother," I created the picture of an iron man.

If I had thought at all I would have seen that ghee[8] poured into flames never could emerge as water. I should have known that what was happening was what was bound to happen. Ghee was burning as ghee — crackling and spluttering. Fire was raging as fire — with redoubled force.

Basu kept coming. Stayed all he could. He seemed to hum and buzz in Neera's presence. Dismissive of the fire in mother's face, his eyes, brow, ears, all spoke. Demanded answers. And the answers came — without fail. Bypassing me. If I was at all needed, it was as a cover, no more. And otherwise too, by having talked about marriage, I had given him my implicit permission. My permission, I felt, had not yet become a dead letter for them.

I was seething. Feeling let down. In two minds. Basu had every right to do what he liked with himself. Basu had no right to do what he liked with our family. Why wasn't I speaking up, making my thoughts known? Why wasn't I reminding him of our dialogue in his room the other day? What was it that was sapping my courage about such straightforwardness?

The truth was, I had no visa to the new emotional frontiers that were opening up in Basu. My easy confidence so far, of special rights over him, was eroding within me somewhere. A new and unknown inhibition was shackling my limbs. When they were alone in the room, for instance, I would flap my chappals loudly before entering, announcing my arrival. What was it that I was frightened of seeing — the thing which I was sure was taking place?

At the cinema or on a picnic or at the theatre, when the three of us were together, I could no longer drag him out for a smoke with the old authority. I felt that they were waiting with bated breath for me to go. That they were avid to convert even the most minute interval of my absence into a spell of total fulfillment.

A palpable tension was breathing in the house. Mother was overrating my capacity to deal with it. And I... I was allowing everything to happen — right under my nose.

Mother could not know why and where my feet came to

a standstill. At the very sight of me the contexts of their dialogue changed, although the tremors it had already set off in their minds criss-crossed their faces. Their refusal to meet my eye threw their faces out of focus. Their faces said one thing, their eyes another.

This aspect of Basu was totally new to me — a soft, driven Basu, a Basu seeking to drown himself in the coy warmth of an adolescent sun. Could any man be so cleaving, so bovine, as the man of a woman's daydreams?

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Mother was very worked up that day. The moment I came in she thrust into my hand a list of things that had to be bought. "Get the medicine first. The rest can wait."

This order at the fag end of a whole day spent mucking around in the library, overriding all her usual concerns of food and rest for me. It was something new for mother.

In reaction my eye strayed to the clock, and catching me at it, she exploded: "You get going... He won't be coming today..."

"Why?" I had barely shaped the word when her face turned a furious red. Caught between wanting to speak and not wanting to, her face shook.

"Did he say something?" I asked.

"What does he have to say? How many times a day does he have to show up here to blacken our faces?"

She went up to the door to leave, and then doubled back. "Do you know when I came home at four o'clock he was here. Both were here, just the two of them. I'd told her, the wretch, in the morning, to come with me when I left, but she fobbed me off with a yarn about studies."

Thought was free. Doubt could be given full rein. The field lay vast. The void of *our* joint absence during *their* joint presence could be filled by any ugly throw up of the mind.

"If you are in such a state why don't you get her married to Basu? Talk to Papa about it?"

"You're saying this? All along you've made a hundred

objections."

Suddenly I couldn't stand it any longer.

"I'll be back," I muttered, left the house, and breathed again only on reaching his hostel.

"Come." He brightened on seeing me, and welcomed me in. I resisted him. I wanted to stamp down things like hesitation, mutuality or lenience that might take control of me. I broke out. "Look, they don't want you there, my parents. It's *their* house, *theirs*. Not mine. Not Neera's either. In what other way am I to tell you this?"

"I too know that it's their house. I know their minds too. And I also feel bad. I am not blind. But what can I do on my own?"

"Oh plenty. You can refuse to go. She calls you? Don't go. Go some other place if you want to move around all that much. You can't do this to me, to them. I was a fool, taking at face value your words that day. Believed you, like a fool."

"I knew you'd bring that in, rub it in." Even after my outburst he sat there calm, unexcited, as though tied to the frame of the cot.

"Yes, I *will* rub it in. You were not the brute you are now."

Now he really was roused. "If you want to call me names, all right, go ahead. But try to understand, understand something at least of what's going on. Do you know how very aggressive she is? Drains you. And I am human. A man, not a non-man, even I. How long can you try to wriggle free? You think I am chasing her?" He stood up and gripped both my shoulders with his hands. Looking straight into my eyes, he said. "Why don't you understand that I'm unable to get away, save myself; I am helpless. I get lost and forget that she is your sister. Forget that you people do not want all this."

"Then why don't you marry her?"

"Marriage? You think she wants to marry? You don't understand. Marriage isn't what she's reaching for as yet. She might, later. Just now she snaps at the bare mention of it."

I felt I was hurtling down an unfathomed, invisible chasm.

"Have you asked her at all?"

"Yes. I have asked." Perspiration beaded on his forehead.

The air seemed to groan to a halt in the room. I stood up, and shoving aside the massed silence, came away.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Afterwards Basu did not come home for many days. I felt guilty. My guilt deepened at the sight of Neera. She was distraught. Openly, visibly so.

I felt like confessing my guilt. But I couldn't. I felt I had gathered into my hand many, many ends of their affair, which would scatter in all directions if I unclenched my hand the least bit.

"I don't care what you say. I'm going to Basu's hostel today," she announced, standing up.

"Basu is not in town. He's gone out."

"You're lying. I saw him on the road yesterday."

"He must be back then. And if he's back he'll turn up here. Nothing new has happened, has it?"

"Yes and no. New things, newer things, many, many things can happen. But..." She swallowed the rest of the sentence.

God knows what she wanted to say.

But I sensed the delicacy of the situation. I slipped into the house and phoned Basu to come over. I would, I decided, nip in the bud this new kind of traffic threatening to come up between them. Far better the old state of affairs than she traipsing off to Basu's hostel at all hours.

In the evening she and I were going to play badminton at the club. I had just kicked the scooter to life when Basu showed up. She was about to hop on to the back seat when she saw him. She went still.

"Hallo Vishaal. Hallo Neera."

"You swine," she clenched her teeth.

Basu turned his attention to me, not to her. He held me with a look that said, "You believe me now? Your own eyes and ears are witness."

His look made me wise, but also shaky.

I said, "Do come along. We're going to play badminton."

"It's not all that important that we go," she cut in swiftly.

I felt she wanted to figure out where best to be, what site

would be most profitable. She took stock of herself, at the picture she made, and began staring at Basu.

Basu turned to putty. The same concentrated and burrowing look that spread over her face stamped itself on his, too. All the self control that he had gathered during these last few days was pulled off him as in a disrobing. Just by staring, entering his totality through the apertures of his eyes, she tore him from his roots.

Basu teetered, caught between the two states of helplessness and arousal.

If I hadn't seen it happening before my very eyes I would never have known what a hurricane a bare look could raise. When a single thrust of the eye can let loose so many decibels of sound present in the depths of the soul, one can only stand in awe.

"Shall we go?" I broke the look.

He was caught between yes and no. "Ask her," he said softly.

"Why ask me?" she flashed. "Haven't you got a head of your own?"

"Ruined by you," I put in.

"You keep out of this," she snubbed me.

Basu began saying something, but didn't, probably because of my presence. It seemed to me that they wanted to settle between themselves which would be better, home or the club, in which setting they could give vent to themselves most. I also felt that she ought to have decided this on her own without dragging Basu in.

I'd go for a stroll, I decided, leave the two to sort it out themselves. I turned, when Basu caught me by the arm. "Where are you going? Let's all go the club."

What a lot there was in this proposal of his, what a lot of steering, skirting around and shoring up!

I was held by just one thought: that Basu had not been a haunted man before. He was now. He was not a helpless man before. He was now.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

What came after this came out of the blue.

The proposal came from the Chawla couple. The initiative was theirs. They had seen Neera at the club and come over, crossing the line which ensured them their privileges as the 'boy's party,' basking in self-admiration at being modern and progressive.

The welfare activities of Shrimati[9] Chawla were manifold. She functioned as president and secretary of numerous societies. Shri[9] Chawla had lived overseas in the days when the fears of permanent estrangement from kith and kin due to crossing the seas were genuine. Disproving such fears, he had returned home fortified by an impressive comparative perspective on the home scene. He said that the stupor that overcame small towns in the long holidays of December drove him to Delhi and Bombay, where gaiety ruled round the year. Shri Chawla said this as an ardent votary of fine living. This time too, he had come to Delhi driven by the same hunger, to his sister and her husband — he, his wife, and their only son, Raman. Their sole heir and successor.

At the moment, Chawla Industries were confined to making small machine parts, but on their sprawling estate of seven-to-eight acres much much more was possible, many schemes floatable. Father and son were to bring the schemes to life. They had everything. What they wanted now was, in the language of the matrimonial ads, "an educated, tall and beautiful girl," without hang-ups, who could absorb the high voltage heat of aspirations bred in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of their home, and not be blinded by the glare, a girl whose personality was at once soft and sharp.

How they came to perceive these qualities in Neera I hadn't the slightest idea. I couldn't even imagine any. On New Year's Eve they had seen Neera dance with Basu, blind to the world. Basu and Neera, and another young pair. These were the only two couples left on the floor. The rest had retired, exhausted, at the twelve o' clock gong, after putting in a last frenzied spurt of energy.

"How full of grace this girl is!" Shrimati Chawla remarked,

Shri Chawla, standing beside her, drawing on his pipe, was also captivated.

"Who's the boy with her?" He had asked Papa.

"My son's friend."

"Have they settled anything between themselves, the two of them?"

"Nothing like that," mother interposed swiftly.

Mother zoomed to cloud nine. No subtle/not-so-subtle inquiries of background/history/caste/creed/geography. The focus was on totally different qualities, those which she had never rated high. This mix of qualities was called "personality" and "sophistication," she learnt.

"That's how high birth and family manifest themselves, in this quick eye for the diamond amidst the dross." Mother sang her hosannahs.

I was sick. Diamond. Dross. What was the matter with mother? Neera, the diamond: the rest, dross. On what scales was she weighing the two? But of course it was a sign of the extreme joy which held her, joy that was proof against self devaluations.

Papa's counsel: Neera's final examinations first. After that, the formalities of marriage. Counsel bluntly struck down. The Chawlas' reasons for the veto were many. Their home was prosperous, overflowing with plenty. Neera wasn't going to be a "working woman" — an euphemism for wage-slave — to be pushed around in buses. There was an army of servants in the house. Freed of cooking and kitchen drudgery there would be nothing to interrupt her studies. Rather, studies would go on better. Raman would also be around to help out. Both would keep each other company.

Parents might be modern to the hilt, their argument went, but youth needed youth, otherwise their feet might slip... Chawla-saheb[10] took the argument to this turn on his own, exulting in his high-mindedness at not laying any condition other than an early marriage in this age of greed and lost values.

"Shouldn't we at least talk to her mother?" Mother asked nervously.

"Sure. Ask her. Talk to her. Call her. We'd also love to meet her."

Exit. Curtains down.

This summary dismissal of all parties other than themselves pointed to one grand finale — their vaulting desire to take home without delay this one in a million girl they had come by.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Our worries were dense, and altogether on a different track. The minute they left, Mother called me in, in confidence, and said, "I leave everything to you now. I know she will be pigheaded about Basu, but explain to her that life is one thing and love, and so on, another. And then, who else will set such value on nothing but herself, just her own rare self?"

Mother was right. I, too, could weigh and reason. But I couldn't see myself speaking the heavy foreword she wanted of me.

Mother didn't know — how could she — that their intimacy had developed a different kind of language altogether now. It was getting a complex grammar and idiom. Only two days ago I had seen her standing at the bus stop opposite the hostel. Waiting for Basu, obviously. I was outraged. These stealthy meetings, what sort of intimacy was it? What more was in store for Mother and Papa?

And now this thing that mother was asking of me suddenly, this mission of mediation. Was it possible? Their live, inseparable closeness on the one hand, and my thinning credibility on the other. Fellow feeling between me and Neera had always been under the shadow of an axe at the best of times, and Basu's coming into the picture had made it only more "axe-prone." Even granting, for argument's sake, that whatever had to be said would be said, even if only to be turned down, what would it achieve? Without trust, how was the barrenness of a wasteland ever to be greened?

But the things had to be said. Mother could say them but she would say them like mother, like herself, with time-worn

clichés for and against. And she would expect results from these homilies. She had not the least inkling of how difficult the task was, considering Neera's explosive state of mind. Even I was scared of it, of what I might set off. And as for mother...

Neera looked worn out when she entered the room. There was venom in my heart. But I was determined to be pleasant.

"Aren't you late today?"

"Meaning?" She stopped in the middle of unstrapping her sandals, and stared fixedly at me.

"Nothing. Perhaps I am early," I withdrew at once. Let her mood thaw.

After washing her face she went out to the kitchen and came back with a plate of chivda[11]. "Want some?" She extended the plate to me. There were two spoons on it. I didn't want to say I'd just eaten. I picked up a spoon. To place the plate within reach she sat down next to me. I said in the most conversational way:

"Those people are coming tomorrow evening. You know, of course."

"I know."

"Your classes will finish tomorrow, won't they?"

"As if you don't know. You are a great showman."

"What's showman-like here? Don't you have extra classes these days?"

"In January?"

"How do I know? Do I sit in your college the whole day?"

"You try your best to." She got up angrily, but let the plate be.

"You eat the chivda. I have had my food."

"Then why did you pretend to eat? Didn't I say you were a showman?"

"I ate to keep you company."

"You? For my company? Think up some other excuse."

"You are hopeless," I threw up my hands. She fell silent. The moment was lost. What had to be said got postponed to another, hopefully more amenable hour. I dropped the strand I held. Maybe she would argue or counter-argue sometime

later, which would make the telling that much easier, I said to myself.

But she did nothing of the sort. I had thought she would object or oppose. I thought she would bring up the intensity of her involvement with Basu, go on about the lack of care in mother's scoldings. But she seemed preoccupied, reflective. The next evening when they came, she was totally composed, in full possession of herself. Free of awkwardness. But alert. Sizing up Chawla Junior with open, unaffected eyes, impeccably respectful to his mother and father. Impressing the aunt and uncle accompanying the main party with a kind of uniqueness she seemed to have developed overnight. The neatness and skill with which her hands moved, making tea, bringing in the tray, was something to behold.

Mother was happy. What magic had I employed, she wondered. Within minutes, like the feet of Vaman[12], I had plumbed the earth and the skies.

Papa was melting like wax. And she, Neera, was looking queenly, above it all, as though she had her own separate and god-given right to exult in her triumph and selection in the evening's test.

I was hurt, rendered speechless. Something rent me. A desperate agitation pushed me, and made me put myself on Basu's side.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Returning from the library, I wandered out to the bazaar. I did not want to go home. When I did, I saw her dressing. The bottle of shoe cream stood on my table, and she was vigorously rubbing it into the white straps of her sandals, absorbed, humming a tune. It was either the second or the third day after the do with Raman and party.

"Where are you off to?"

"Why? Don't you know?"

"How would I know?"

"What a faker you are. Anyway, Romi is taking me out."

"Romi? Who's that?" Now I really faked. I wanted to get

across to her the crassness of reaching pet name familiarity in so short a time.

"Romi, yes," she swivelled on her heel. "I mean Mr Raman Chawla. Bachelor of Engineering. Within brackets, mechanical."

"He and his people were to leave for Indore yesterday."

"His people have. He, Romi, is still here, with his aunt."

I sank onto my bed.

She had put on her sandals. Tilting her head to the left, letting her hair fall in a cascade, she began brushing it vigorously with her right hand. The action brought into sharp focus the outline of her right cheek. Flushed warm face. Healthy skin, soft as a baby's, and glowing, pink tipped ears.

I was seeing her for the first time as a woman, a woman being gazed at by a man, just any man, Romi, Basu, I, any one. Casting aside my ties of brotherhood with her.

I thought she was beautiful, attractive. Not the attractiveness of true beauty, which seeps in little by little into you and lights you up from within. But the attractiveness that incites, calls, and challenges the manhood of a man.

How easy, how very easy it was to see Basu's helplessness in the face of this aggressive lure!

I saw it as through clairvoyance.

"When will you be back?"

"How can I tell?"

"If Basu comes?" I needled her.

With her polished nails she tapped her teeth and thought for some time, and then said, "Stave him off somehow. Or tell him everything."

"Everything means?"

"O, just what is happening around here now."

"Have you thought carefully about what you are asking me to say?"

"About what?"

"About yourself and Romi. All this while it was him, Basu, that you ..." I faltered midway, as I always did.

"Why don't you ask Basu himself all these things? You go on as though I am the one riding his shoulders. Trickster.

Bully."

Her face twisted with the saying of these great truths, but she cooled off the next moment. She drew back the zip of her bag and groped in it. She drew out a bottle of perfume.

She sprinkled a few drops on her fingertips and rubbed them behind her ears. Then she put a drop of the sizzling fragrance on the tip of her tongue. I caught my breath, reading the import of this action. Seated on my cot I gazed away at the spectacle of her at her toilette. My presence made not the slightest difference to her.

The bell rang and she rushed off. "O there he is, Romi. He said eight o'clock and it's only a quarter to, yet... Listen, please go out and sit with him for a while, please."

I couldn't stir. I was limp, blank. The urge to get up just didn't rise in my mind.

"I knew you wouldn't go. You are jealous of me. Everyone is jealous of me. But I don't care."

"That I can see."

Outside, mother was probably making Raman welcome, gushing over him. Sheltering in the shade of his sojourn — what a lot she was trying to cover up, my poor mother.

Swinging her hair, clicking the heels of her sandals, Neera went out of the room and came back in ten minutes.

"Vishaal, can you lend us your scooter? In case..."

Without a word I handed her the key.

"Thank you," in a flutter of gratefulness she pressed my hand and turned away.

"Listen," I called out. She stopped. "I want to say just one thing to you." I don't know when and how this particular worry had floated up in me. "If you're going to settle something, let maasi first come here. She is your mother, after all."

The softness of a minute ago left her face like steam. She fumed: "Just save whatever you have to say for the night, will you? I am going now," And she went out on swift, springy steps.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

When she sailed into the room next, in a flaming cloud of fragrance, it was a quarter to twelve. I was awake, reading by the lamp at the head of the bed. I looked at the clock with a studied casual air. She caught me looking.

"It's very late, yes," she untied her sandals.

"Who opened the door?"

"Shibboo. So smart of him. Opened the door immediately on hearing the scooter, as though he had been sitting with his ear to the door. Maybe he was."

"Mother must have been up too. Where is Raman staying?"

"At his aunt's. I told you. And yes, he's taken your scooter. He'll return it early morning, tomorrow. He'll also meet you," She said the last three words in an undertone, as if to herself.

"Doesn't matter." I meant the scooter.

Taking her nightgown off the hook she flung her orange coloured sari on the bed.

When she came out she looked bathed, brimming within. And in her old, familiar way she sat down on the cot, dangling her legs. Speaking even without speaking. Her face luminous and eager, ready to open up in communication.

"Where did you folks go?"

"To the Ashoka."

"Your first visit there, probably?"

"My first visit to any five star hotel. I could have gone at Mannu's wedding, but you people left me behind."

"You were ill then, of suspected measles.

"Suspected only."

"Anything special you talked about with Raman?"

"Why do you always act innocent? Would I go if there was nothing special?"

"Why not?" I looked at her straight, smiling only with my lips, not my eyes.

She lost colour. I had hit just where I wanted to. I was not ready to see her so unaffected by the one and so involved with the other.

Something seized her, I don't know what. She sprang away from the bed and began pacing the room. The short length

of the room, and her rapid strides. The striding stopped, suddenly. She sat down heavily on the bed and began worrying her nails with her teeth. She saw me staring at her and crossed over to the window and looked out.

What was there in the dark that she was expecting to see? In darkness that swallows up every form, face and figure?

When she came away from the window, she looked immeasurably sad. The square frame of the window had, God knows how, soaked up the glow that had been on her face when she came out of the bathroom. There was now on her face, her old, faraway look. And then came her sudden question:

"You were saying something about mother, weren't you, in the morning?"

"I was saying that if any decision is taken without her presence she will be hurt."

"She won't be hurt. She's washed her hands of me. I bring ill luck, she says. She just gave me away to whoever was prepared to have me. It happened to be your people."

She had probably talked this way with me just once or twice before, without hitting back, or in anger.

"Well, how many people can place so much trust in others?"

"So what. If people like her don't trust others, who will bring up the brats they spawn and abandon? Mark my words, she will have no particular opinion about this. Won't hold out any kind of support. Just keep on looking helpless, she will. Oh, I know her well, very, very well. I'll have to do everything myself, decide, think it all out all on my own. Not like you, sitting around sheltered and protected."

It looked as if she comprehended an enormous amount for her age, matters which hardly drew the attention of others. This foresight and comprehension, where had she got them from? What trials had taught them to her?

"If it's you that has to do the thinking, you must have done quite a bit by now."

"No, nothing just now." She got up in extreme restlessness and began pacing the room again.

There was something about this restlessness that made me wonder if I should ask her whether she wanted to meet Basu. Did she want the support of his presence and friendship to come to a decision? Should I ask? But I didn't know where to begin, what to begin with. I had vague clues, at best.

"Did he come today?" She did not name Basu.

"He came."

"Did you tell him anything about where I had gone?"

"No. Nothing."

"If you can run to him at all hours for inside stories about me, can't you tell him about my feelings just now?"

Easy, easy, I steadied myself, as my head swam. Did this mean she wanted my help to explain things to Basu? "First I have to know what your feelings are just now."

Suddenly her frenzy subsided. She was quiet. I waited, but she didn't speak, didn't. The dialogue ended for no reason I could see.

"Do you want to read yet?"

"No. You probably want to go to sleep."

I switched off the lamp. I sank onto the mattress. She sank into hers. A mute something, of a heavy breathing, it seemed to me, was awake in the room, eyes open under cover of darkness, invisible, uneasing.

I don't know when she went to sleep, when I slept. But her urgent moving around woke me. Without a thought to my lying asleep, she knocked around in the room.

"Uf-f-f-f: how late I am. Romi must be about to arrive, to return your scooter. I am really quite fed up of this fussy punctuality of his. So off-putting."

"How well you know him! Since when?" I clipped my query to make her wince. She didn't, though.

"Oh, but you can so easily tell these things after a couple of meetings. Surely you know that."

She was talking like a wizened grandmother.

But she snapped out of it the next moment. "O.K, don't get me worked up at this hour with your comments. And kindly let your towel be, now. I want to have my bath first. I don't have all the time in the world. Not like you."

I just sat in the chair. Seeing. And seeing. I was understanding. And understanding.

Was I to be happy or unhappy?

The question stifled.

To detach the future of a girl like her from a man like Basu. This was what I had been wanting all these days.

Now it was happening, really happening.

Then why, why, this lamentation?

Maybe because even I could not bear her rank defection and floor-crossing.

How then could Basu?

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"So what's happening at the home front?"

Basu asked me the moment I came to the hostel. The question must have been running around in his mind all along.

I couldn't match my response with the quick bounce of his question. What came out of my mouth was halting, groping. "Talks are going on just now, for Neera and a Raman Chawla of Indore. Engineer. Some bigshot's son.

"If they reach an agreement, the wedding will be soon. Even before the summer holidays." I thought it very necessary to add the postscript.

"I had my premonitions."

"Didn't she tell you?"

"No, she looks at me as if she didn't know me from Adam."

When and how had she met him while cavorting with Raman? I did not ask.

His drooping, blank face. It was a new sight for me — unpleasant, unbearable.

He lit a cigarette and drew on it, staring at the wall. I wanted him to speak, speak. What other means were there of reaching the heart of a man?

But he was free of the need to communicate.

Other means were unthinkable, beyond the pale.

"When you were not ready for the plunge yourself, such

a thing was bound to happen sooner or later."

"Who says I was not ready? Perhaps not in the beginning. But later on, she was the one not ready. No marriage and messing around with babies and all the rest of it now, not yet, thank you. But this Mister Engineer, this Mister Bigshot. Doesn't he come in the 'not yet' category? Was I the only one left to destroy?"

Lashed by what pain did he come out with these private and intimate details about him and Neera?

And the word 'destroy' did not seem a real, felt word. It seemed to be a fallout of his severe reaction. Neera as destroyer? So fickle, insecure, self-obessed, and crazed a girl, reaching for branches high above the head, standing on the toes of her bird's feet?

And Basu to be destroyed? Basu, who had kicked aside parents, home, tradition, and history, who was total and complete in himself? But the severity of his reaction was only proof of the slow knifing of his wounds.

He couldn't possibly have known what I was brooding about. My silence, winding through the mazes of my brooding, must have jarred on him. "I know why you are quiet, what you are thinking. Just this, isn't it, that if I wasn't to marry her, why was I with her at all? Was I such a weakling? Was I just playing around with her? Go on, ask, you've been asking so much all these days, why not this too?"

"Please, please, Basu...."

He was roused from deep within. "I was the fool. I thought I could afford to lose, lose without losing face. Not like her. I could lose, throw away, change my beliefs. I could even lose myself. I wasn't helpless like her. While she, the fights with life she was waging — paying for what misdeeds of parents and past, god alone knew. So I thought, fool that I was. Now I know that she can lose nothing."

"You do know, Basu, that she overreacts," Now I wanted to probe. "Was there, maybe, some kind of confrontation, some hot exchange you had had over something or the other? Who knows, she may be doing all this just to get even."

"Confrontations and exchanges I could have taken in my

stride. They wouldn't have hurt me or her. But where would she have got a guinea pig par excellence like me? Who else could she whistle to and get? She wanted to test her own power. I was necessary for the experiment. But the sequel to her experiment, so soon? Right now even the corpses of the convictions I killed haven't been taken away. And there's nothing like her wanting to get even with me. She probably does sincerely consider the Shrimaanji[13] she is with now better than me."

Impatiently, he gathered together his scattered self, ground out the half smoked cigarette in the ashtray, and planting both elbows on this knees, cupped his face in his hands. He closed his eyes. And kept them closed.

He cast me out of himself. Made me irrelevant. I did not know whether I ought to go or continue to sit. "Come along. Let's go home. Let's have tea there," I urged.

His eyes opened, shone for a moment, and then closed again, as if extinguished. "No. What'll we do there? Let's stay here. I can send for tea if you want."

"Let's have it somewhere else."

He looked at his watch and said no. Perhaps the hope of Neera coming over woke in his mind again. And after that he just sat. Untied to me. Divided. I thought his unhinged state too was a language. I was unhinged myself. To test him I stood up to go. He didn't press me to stay.

"All right, then."

Those three words by me were the last of that meeting between us.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

It was five thirty when I reached home. I was sure that she wouldn't be home. She'd have set off to keep her daily tryst with him, I thought, driven by the hands of the clock. But she was there. Dressed in her "going-out" clothes. She was just back from a tryst with Raman. The house seemed as awash with gaiety as a wedding marquee.

My taciturn father was overjoyed. My simple mother was beside herself with excitement.

"I was afraid for no reason. Raman and Neera have clicked, just clicked. You can take it that it's as a good as settled. Send a telegram to maasi. I, too, am writing, of course. When she sees her son-in-law she won't be able to contain herself."

In the vast and distending expanse of her imagination mother became maasi herself, brimming over.

And I, I didn't want to go to the telegraph office, but back to Basu's hostel. If he was fire, I would be water. If he was water, I, like the thirst of sand, would soak him into myself. An intense ache for him in each pore of my body .... what a ruthless, unjust gang we were — I, Papa, Neera, Mother and Raman, the whole tribe had combined against him and thrown him to the wolves.

I didn't go to the telegraph office, but to the hostel. He wasn't there. The room was locked. I wandered around a bit and then returned. After dinner I went again, weighted down with mother's displeasure. He wasn't there. I came back deflated.

Neera was playing hard to get. But only with me. With a lot of babble and chatter she had made kheer[14] with her own lily hands and was coaxing spoonfuls into mother's mouth, making her sit in a chair like a baby. I came up to the verandah, and watching the scene, turned back, sick. When she came in to make our beds, I thought she would tell me too the things she had been regaling papa and mother with, things that had brought stars to their eyes. I was her brother, dammit, not her enemy.

She came in, spread the sheets on both beds, and went away. She didn't even bother to fold the bedspreads and put them in the cupboard.

Her wordless exit enraged me, but soon my wild flood of anger found a channel and a course. Let her do anything she liked with me, let her. Ours were ancient and timeless quarrels. But why with Basu? Why such pitiless indifference to him? For all his total and unconditional giving, was this his real standing in the house, when the chips were down? Why was she what she was, in love with herself, besotted, bloated with self-love?

I decided to have it out with her — tear her fibre by fibre, inch by inch. Whatever was to happen would happen, of course, but let her know the dirt left behind by her running feet.

This time she came back, finished with her chores. The bowl of kheer was in her hands.

"Here, here's your share."

"I don't want it." I almost shouted.

"Come, come, have it, for my sake..." She spoke with new-found unflappability, laced with affection. "How many days are there anyway for me here? My time is up."

I fell prey to her gentleness. I melted in the rare and warm currents of tenderness escaping from her hardness. My burgeoning tension was punctured by one tiny point of affection.

In that transition from a frenzy of rage to a frenzy of sentimentality I was deserted by my own self.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

But my thirst for meeting Basu was as intense as ever. The mind within the mind was chained to Basu. Just one scene haunted my mind. The scene of Neera staring, and Basu's face losing coherence, being slowly pulped. It seemed to me that principle and right action and so on were abstractions. The truth was only what had happened then, at that hour — Neera staring. Basu in a state of slow liquefaction.

If it were not so, why was he looking defeated? If he was a blessing and inspiration to Neera, why was he looking deflated? Was it that it was just I, his inseparable Vishaal, his alter-ego, who could not accept him defeated, see him spell-bound by unworthy influences, destroyed by hands to which I had never attached importance? No, no — if a man of his worth broke down it should not be with a whimper.

He was still in bed when I reached his room, the morning deep and bright. Smoking. The ashtray was overflowing with stubs. Eyes so bitter-open as if to proclaim their night-long vigil.

The moment he saw me, he leapt out of bed, picked up the ashtray, emptied it into the basket, and went out of the room. This childish attempt to hide shred me. When he came back he was washed and freshened, attentive, a bit out of the doldrums.

"I came twice last night. Where were you?"

"No particular place. Wandered around." He tried to bring up something like a smile from within him, without success. His lips made a line on his sleepy parched face.

"You didn't go to class today?"

"No."

"Got up late?"

"Yes."

"Not had tea yet?"

"Had it."

I felt I was being sucked in, into the very black hole from which I had come to rescue him. It was silent suffering, and of such relentless, ruthless drawing power that it seemed it would loosen its grip only after flinging me on rocks within, rocks that had lain inert for centuries.

This huge body of solid flesh and bone burning without smoke. Such a complete breakdown led to an assertive strength which I got as a reaction, as it were.

"Put on your clothes, let's get some breakfast somewhere," I pulled at his arm. "If you like we can go home too." I thought he might like to see her.

His silence gave me strength, once again. I said, "I am with you, am I not? You are coming with me to my place. O.K?" I stressed "me" and "my."

"You want to escort me?" He seemed to come awake suddenly.

"No! I want to protect you!" The words leapt out of my mouth.

"But why? Please, please, Vishaal! I don't want anybody's protection. Please stay out of this. I don't want anything, anything at all." He was gasping.

I too collapsed. I had lost my way again. The air went still, heavy, with a clinging weariness.

"Do you know how bereft of support in life I feel, to see you broken like this?" I said this to kindle his self-esteem. But it irritated him.

"Meaning I am a wall of brick and stone for all of you to lean on?"

"What sort of talk is this, Basu?" I placed my hand on his shoulder, wanting to bring in softness. But he moved away roughly, fell silent again.

I was angry now. What was the meaning of this ultra-brave air he was wrapping around himself? He could be open with a friend. Friendship meant just that. Where was the block? Who, what, caused the hitch? She? Neera? But she was gone!

"I am ashamed that I am useless to you even as a friend who can share and lighten your suffering. A friend to whom you can tell..."

"What? Just let me know, what it is that you want to hear! You want to hear me blubber about how I was taken for a ride? How I was proven wrong? Proven a fool? How good you'd feel, hearing it all! For weren't you warning me from the beginning? You'll feel so good, because the foolish make the wise feel so good, so much wiser. What do you want to know? How many feet high I fell from? Where I am broken? Where torn? So that you can put your arms round me, give me your shoulder to weep on?"

"Have I come to you for this? How wrong you are!"

"For what else, then? You've always come here for this. Just to put me in the dock and see me squirm, made answerable. But now everything is clear and settled, on that score, at least. For she is the one who has come out well and victorious. The one capable of taking snap decisions. Hard and soundless slaps she's given me. She's safe, isn't she? So what's left for you to gripe about?"

What could I have wanted to say? What did I say? I can't remember. Basu sat huddled in the chair opposite, his voice knife-like, a hard, thorny voice, cutting into the banked ice.

"What else now? What more do you want to know? Do you want to know about the real worth of the support I was to be to you all? This pedestal you are putting me on for no

reason? The picture I make is distressing, isn't it? Distresses me too. Will keep on distressing me. Haunting me. Where is the "I," which I had to guard and preserve? What kind of garnering was it that could be scattered to the winds by a slip of a girl? Where is that "I"? My whole and intact "I"? I have no answer to this. I know nothing now. I just know that there can be no greater celebration for the debut of my nothingness."

His voice was soggy, wringing out words.

"Let me say one thing more. Final. Real. Believe me, I had wanted her fighting, brave. She's become all this and I ought to be happy. But I am not happy, not happy. Not happy. Destroyed."

From his huddled posture he unwound and stretched out fully on the chair, like a loose heap of crumpled cloth, yards long.

"I can still try, try to make her change her decision."

Who was this groaning out the words from within me?

"Is this what you think I mean?"

He fixed upon me his bleached eyes which had neither warmth nor animation. "That I want possession of a slip of a girl? You are really simplifying things, to put it politely. I have nothing more to say, really and truly nothing. If you want to go, go."

It was good he did not speak any more. I sat hushed. He did, too. A foul something was breathing between us, somewhere.

He got up and came over to my chair, and he placed his arm about my shoulder roughly.

"Vishaal, go now, Please go. I need to be by myself."

I couldn't have resisted him even if I had wanted to.

There was a strange force in his arm across my back, pressing my right shoulder. He was practically pushing me out.

In a trance, I moved towards the door. Then I heard him call out, "Thanks, Vishaal. Good-bye."

I didn't know then that it would be my last meeting with him.

That year he dropped out. After two years I saw his photo

last week. In *The Indian Express* as leader of a cycling team from Delhi to Kanyakumari.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The state in which I came home. The weight of him, the weight of myself, the weight of circumstances. When I reached home, I felt I had carried myself on my back. My feet were not there, not on their feet. Such motionless feet.

"What's happened to you?" Mother was alarmed. "Are you alright?"

"Nothing. Nothing in particular. Just feeling dizzy. It'll pass."

I lay down facing the wall.

Everybody would be taken in, but not she. She came in two or three times. I knew her footfall. Finally, getting impatient, she made a din with her moving around. I did not want to hear her. Did not.

She called out. "Listen."

I gave an angry grunt. I did not turn around.

"What the hell! Please, Vishaal. Turn your face this way."

"What is it?"

"You met him?"

"Who?" I wanted to hurt her, hurt her. Violence flared up within me with red-hot, leaping tongue.

"Basu. That's where you went."

"I met him."

"Did he say anything?"

"Yes he did. He said you were cruel, selfish, a cheat, that you had deceived him, used him, destroyed him."

Supporting herself against both wings of the doorway, she stood for a minute. Still as a statue.

"He will forget. Just as I am forgetting. Fast."

She went away.

I sat up. I thought she was the oldest of us. She was the far-sighted one. Much, much more mature than we two foolish and hallucinating friends. Well-versed in the

arithmetics of this world.

So well-versed that she could peer into the invisibleness of the future and make such predictions.

Narrative two

Mother's letter arrives in English. An awkward English which makes you think of a swift-flowing river caught in thickets. The river, river that it is, cannot stop. And the thickets, thickets that they are, cannot but obstruct and bully.

I know for sure that mother wants to write to me in our own language. She wants the odour and tongue of the country to stay alive in me. If it isn't done consciously I can well forget both. She wants, too, that the teasing challenge of reading Hindi should stay alive in me. She thinks the effort I have to make will give me the feel of her for hours together.

So why does mother write to me in English? Even when not wanting to, why does she persist in using that alien language? Why does she give prime importance to my convenience or inconvenience? Does she want to spare me even the minimal discomfort of the effort of reading Hindi? Just for this trite reason — a non-reason — she is willing to let her face go funny and foreign.

She can easily keep intact the bridge made by our common language. Martha's foreign-ness only makes it that much easier. But she does nothing of the sort.

Why don't I snap at her that since she wants to, so much, can't she just go ahead and write in Hindi?

"O, but it wouldn't suit you," she'd answer.

"Have I ever said it doesn't suit me?"

"Are all things said?"

"What's your charge, mother, for heaven's sake? What're you going on about?"

"Charge? Going on?"

Then she'd be quiet. The matter would end there. But the itching below would continue, the sores stay.

Often, I take it upon myself to write to her in Hindi. I choose words that seem to match the warmth I feel. In this

labour I must have, at some time or the other, chosen awkward and clumsy words, for once she asked:

"Why write like this hiding your real self? What's in a language? Any language. As it is your letters come once in a blue moon."

She changes course before hitting the shrill notes of accusation. The traffic of English starts again. And this breach of true dialogue she fills up with nice, auspicious news. She talks sweet, my mother, but does not talk true.

I put the letter on the stool by the sofa after reading it, as a reminder to myself that a reply is due. But as it lies around, the half-open piece of paper becomes such a familiar sight that I stop seeing it.

The non-seeing goes on till Martha comes down on me, one Sunday, during the weekly cleaning rumpus. "This is not India, mister, where wives slog for husbands the whole day long. Take care of your letters yourself."

She picks up the letter and shoves it into my section of the cupboard. And there the letter goes to sleep. I don't know how, the letter flies out of the zone of my attention.

Other things pile up in my mind.

These other things keep piling up.

Things cannot stir on their own, piled or unpiled.

There is no stir in my mind either.

My mind feels like a tent that tightens and tightens, till its peak goes so high above that it rises clear of the head.

Then one day a second letter from mother arrives to wake up the first.

This second letter cries out "Very Important" in every other line. The address of a particular university is Very Important to get. Papa's reports are being sent, their analysis is Very Important.

How far is Houston? It is Very Important to know, for a friend has asked.

I wish, I wish, I had it in me to push myself into these Very Important needs of theirs. I know what they really want to hear. What they're really waiting for.

But when there's no chance of my telling them the truth,

what's left?

Just local news. Everyday things.

Things that begin in the morning and go on till dusk.

Iron belts around the waist, irons without let.

What's there to share?

The dust and grime of the by-ways through which I am passing coats my clothes. Whatever I am, whatever I become, is for this clime only. I don't want to give them a peep hole into my life here.

Let them think what they want. Let them fill up the map with whatever colours they choose. This lying low, this lurking in a 'no reply' zone, is in line with the air here. Surroundings and self have the same celsius. You are saved the splitting of self. But are you, really?

The 'no reply' state doubles back on me sometimes and begins to bite me like the serpent biting its own head. I bestir myself then, even if I don't want to. I try to remember family anniversaries: when papa was born: when bhaiya[1] and bhabhi[2] got married when Chintu and Mintu have their birthdays.

When a date floats up in my memory I go out and buy an expensive and showy card. The standard, sentimental slogans on the card suit me to a "t." By putting down my signature I make mine these prefab sentiments. "Am mostly in a hurry. Shall write to each of you separately and at length later on."

It's over. I feel free. I seek, and find, a reprieve.

The load lightens, yes, but the mind stays heavy. Happiness remains a yearning. On the outside everything is smooth, in place. Work, output, body, the regimentation, the commuting, order, sleep, the stern dictum, painfully learnt, of relying on none but your own self. But only outwardly, like the flow of water that forgets the reality of the earth below.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Three years. Three full years. Like bricks piled one on top of the other, one thousand and ninety five days. When I came

here it wasn't there in my mind, even as a distant dream, that I wouldn't be going back for so many years. If anyone had so much as suggested it I'd have broken his head.

I did not go. They, too, neither asked, nor said anything, nor hoped. Whether they were happy at my being in this paradise called America, or proud at my feat of being on my own here on alien soil, I didn't know. I didn't want to breach in any way the ramparts of their perception and understanding.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

How overjoyed they will be at my sudden appearance. They will bathe in the fountain suddenly gushing from the aridity of their daily lives. How I can be so sure of their joy even after so many years of stay here, I cannot explain. But I know. I know for certain, am dead certain.

How this leap of imagination excites me. My eyes offer up my mind to reach out and touch my home.

The feel of the sky through the round window of the aeroplane elates me. I cannot believe that I am skimming along the highway of infinity so easily. I feel I am bathing after years.

How I wish Vaseem was not sitting by my side but elsewhere. My train of memories would have remained uninterrupted. But I cannot wish away Vaseem. He was the one who decided to come home, which made my coming, too, possible. Otherwise I might have stayed stuck there for years.

Vaseem. Distracting me from myself continually with his chatter. For the nth time he asks me my reaction to Nusrat, a reaction he knows only too well by now. I have played listener to the story of his marriage for I don't know how long.

Till now he had been in the seventh heaven of joy for he had not yet seen Nusrat. Madam writes to him long letters enveloped in perfume. Madam cannot any more bear the house in which she has lived in peace all these years. The prince must now come and carry away the princess on his white steed. She writes, your father is unduly harsh in laying down that the nikah[3] will be performed only after you come

home for good. Am I to marry without tasting the joys of the paradise that is America? Doesn't your manhood push you to do something about it?

Challenges like this enchant Vaseem, do not enrage him. "Just let her be with me and I'll prove my manhood in a hundred ways."

The trouble arose when Madam sent a big photo of herself. On a pale enlargement of her own face she had written a verse in black ink.

Vaseem came down to earth with a crash. The face behind the lettering was nothing to lose sleep over. "Look at that. No spark in the eyes, no play. But the words so cheeky they dance before me all the time."

I tried to separate beauty from worth for him, the seen from the felt. But Vaseem was distressed. Nusrat's divine innocence suddenly seemed rank childishness to him.

"No, no, not a thing more, not till I have seen and come to my own conclusions. And look at Abba[4]! At me all the time, 'think of nothing but work,' and throwing these baits at me! How will I ever work?"

"What does your Abba know of your carryings-on behind his back?"

"So what? I wish I had gone home before. I could have made my own decision. Now I'm feeling so cornered that I have no idea how I am to get past the army waiting for me there. They are waiting with sehras[5] in their hands, dammit! Listen!" Vaseem is inspired suddenly. "You come along with me. Let me have somebody by my side."

With his reasoning of "two is better than one," he tries to enthuse me. But I don't want to be enthused. I would have gone if I had amounted to something here. But now? What have I got to show? My pockets are empty, my hands are empty.

Vaseem smells out the reason for my reluctance. He can. He and I are caught in the same time-warp, after all. Away from home we are all the same, clothed or naked. Nobody examines your genes out here. You don't carry your ancestry branded on your nape.

Patience is not among Vaseem's virtues. On top of that, there is the spot he is in, its fine claws digging into him.

He came down to pleading, and then, to hitching me on his back.

"I'll pay your fare. And don't squint like that. Return it or not, just as you like. You aren't the one wanting to go. I'm the one dragging you. Meeting your people and so on — take it as a bonus. It *has* been long since you saw them.

It's tempting, smooth ground he's putting me on. I dig in my toes, though. I don't want Vaseem's generosity for free. Without the capacity to return it, the goodwill might prove to be like Raja Janak's bow[6].

Vaseem loses his temper as I try to smother my spark of eagerness by heaping the ashes of prudence upon it.

"You are the limit. Not your fault, I suppose. We're all brain-washed living here. We, too, set everything against money, just as these people do."

"Don't we people do the same there?" I go pedantic, reach for trite philosophy. "It's a different thing that our centuries old habit of wrapping ourselves with high falutin talk keeps ugly realities under cover. Here they are frank, accept things openly. Faced with a situation we people flounder, caught between the wish to say yes, and the vain thrill of saying no. We think one thing, do another. Result, life-long dilemma..."

Vaseem is in no mood for my pedantry and philosophy. He is lost, squeezed between the workings of his izzat[7]-conscious Abba, and their implications for himself.

I pick up another strand of my side of the case and try to bind Vaseem with it.

"Why get into a sweat? Nothing can be settled without your green signal... and..."

"And the way things are rushing there..." He cuts me mid-sentence. "Look, my future's about to go bust and here you are..."

"What do you mean go bust? If it goes bust you switch... Simple. 'Talaaq[8]. Talaaq. Talaaq.' All over. Free and fair. Your religion gives you full rope."

Vaseem flares up. "Whether mine does or not you most

certainly chew away at the same rope all the time. Carry on a secret debate within yourself whether to hang on to Martha or ditch her. Go on, tell me I am wrong!"

A friend can strip you bare. That's the privilege of friendship. I should have been able to say to Vaseem, "Yes, I tell you you are wrong." But I do not. I do not know if Martha is a curse or a blessing to me.

I still do not know.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Home. Sweet, sweet home.

But at its sweet sweet entrance what a giant of an inhibition scowls!

Springs into my mind in the shape of a question mark, like the automatic door in the airport that had sprung open as soon as my feet neared it.

What have these feet brought home? The feet of the son who crossed the seas in quest of his destiny?

What answer can I make? The pressure for an answer was not there in Martha's country. But it will be, here. Here, no man is by, or for, himself.

Even if questions are not asked, answers will have to be given. And I will be cornered into making excuses, dodging. But will my dodging pass muster in papa's eagle eyes?

At the prospect of going he had stood in my way as my severest critic. Prashant's invitation did not dazzle him as it did me. Prashant had written:

Just come over, by hook or by crook. Helping hands are needed. Take it for granted that everything is ready and just waiting for a kick start. If both of us are together our export business will rise to the skies. Only, bring some sample leather jackets and two dozen gloves, without fail.

"And your studies?" Papa brought down the skyscraper of dreams rising in my mind. I said:

"Studies are only for this, after all. For making money."

"Who told you that? What about growth, real growth? Isn't there any such thing? And foresight? If you'd had it you

wouldn't be going berserk over some ten lines of black ink from a friend."

I tried to be clever. "Look, do try to remember that Prashant is also studying. He says it time and again — that there's Continuing Education over there. Earning and learning simultaneously. Not like here, sitting in your father's lap till you're through with your M.A."

Papa must have thought me rude. But he also probably wanted to test how far I was prepared to jump. "What are you thinking of doing, in the last analysis?" he asked.

"I'm not thinking. I'm going." It was blunt, but I thought it was less blunt than saying "I want to go."

"How?" The word tumbled out and stood stiff between us. "Do you expect me to fork over to you your brothers' and sisters' shares too? I don't even know what exactly your share is."

"I have not mentioned money apart from the ticket."

"Good thing you haven't. Teach you to stand on your own feet, it will. If you ask me, though, I'd still say that the half loaf at home is better than the double loaf outside. At least you belong here, the earth under your feet is your own. What do you have there? Hundreds and thousands of moonstruck young like yourself. They go, chockful of half-baked ideas and get stuck there. Either they never have the money to come back, or they ask, crassly, why the hell they *should* come back."

In my roused state, Papa's reasoning sounded like fool's philosophy. All methods of persuasion, pleading and opposition were kept up for days. And under their push and badger, my decision jelled.

"Go then, my stupid, sea-faring son. In ancient times people crossed the seas alone, in quest of their destinies. Good thing today there are friends to tow you and act as godfathers too. But remember, let your friendship be on an equal footing. If you've got to slog anyway, why be enslaved too? Slog without slavery, my son. Once you are enslaved..."

How was Papa to know that Prashant had dashed off to Chicago as soon as he'd posted his letter to me? On the trail of some black girl, leaving me with his arrears of rent, which

Martha cleared after a lot of yelling.

Why did I think, at that time, that this was one of Martha's great generosities?

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

They are so taken aback at seeing me that poise deserts them.

"Without informing? All of a sudden like this?"

I postpone answering this question. Something stops me from saying that I was there because Vaseem had pressed me. It tilts the balance in favour of Vaseem too soon. I am not ready for it.

I cannot tell them that to re-cross frontiers you have crossed one way already, is not limited to the romance of longing or desire. You have to get the means of fulfilling the desire i.e. money. And that means you work yourself to the bone.

"Why hasn't Martha come?" Each person asks the question by turn. Perhaps they secretly wish that Martha wouldn't come, hadn't really come. For them, Martha is a piece of information, not quite believable, or belief-worthy even.

He is all ours. Let's forget Martha — I want them to think something like this. It may not be possible later on.

Papa gives his manly yet friendly admonishment about letters. "You could at least have thought of your mother. Poor thing, she never tires of writing to you. And when you write you do deserve a reply. That's why I don't write. I can't hear the neglect."

"Neglect? What neglect?" Maa covers up for me swiftly.

"Are our ties with him based on trivia like these?"

I sit in the chair, and Maa places her hands on my shoulders. I feel the press of the windcheater against me. Not of her hands.

My elder brother, sitting opposite, seems self-contained in his detached curiosity. In his smile there is a mellow stillness, an attractive composure. Is it strength drawn from the security of going up the ladder of life step by step? Is it because of his double advantage — the bounty left by his forefathers

and what he has made on his own?

Chintoo and Mintoo keep staring at my box. Bhabhi chatters away in over excitement. "Eat your fill of poories[9] today, don't put it off for tomorrow, my little brother from America! Tomorrow I go out to teach."

"Since when have you been working?"

"Two years now."

"From the time your mother retired. Mother is the one that minds the house now, somebody has to. Retired and with time on her hands. That's why the flood of letters to you, silly woman ..."

Papa carps. He still has that stick to beat me with.

Maa does not like to be laid bare. She bends down and begins to play with the tassels at the edge of her pallaa[10].

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

So many eyes and ears pass into me. I expand. All the ferment in my veins, still for so many years, begins bubbling again. How deprived I have been! I could cry.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Papa looks closely at the things I take out from my bag. Examining the label of the jersey I've bought for bhaiya, he says, quite suddenly, "Doesn't look as if your business is exactly blooming."

"No, it's not like that at all. Absolutely not like that."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure. In another year it will be excellent."

"How many years is it already? Two? Two and a half? No, three. Three, isn't it?"

Papa is rubbing it in.

"Not three, About three. Why?"

"Nothing. Just asked. People say that what a man here manages to make by his mid-forties or fifties, chaps there finish making in their early twenties."

"Must be true. Yes, it's true." I try to align the two

statements.

"And how big a pile have you made?"

"I'll tell you after three years. I'll give you folks a surprise."

I acknowledge to myself Papa's shrewdness and insight. I cast about for a change of subject.

A small girl comes in right then with a tray of tea, dressed in a red salwaar. It is an agreeable picture.

"This is Kamlee," bhaiya introduces her. "Kamlee, this is my brother you saw in the photograph. Do you recognise him?"

"But where is the photo now?" Kamlee runs off saying this.

Curiosity rises in me. What did Kamlee mean? I turn my eyes to the T.V. set. That's where my photo used to be. But a huge statue of Ganesh stands on the T.V. now, pot belly and all.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

I follow Maa around with my eyes. After the few minutes that we had had on the day I came in, Maa has been just pottering around the house, preoccupied. Seeing her pause by the gas cylinder in the kitchen, I infiltrate her fragile, workaday solitude. I want to ask her point-blank, "Where is the photo of me that stood on the T.V.?"

But I cannot muster the strength to ask point blank questions exclusively about myself. I try to think up a back door entry into the question.

Maa is slow-stirring sooji[11] in the pan made of kaansaa[12]. Preliminaries for making halva[13]. The sight of the kaansaa pan reminds me of Maa saying in self-satisfied tones, long ago:

"Good thing I stowed this away. The utensils they make these days are like scrap iron," thereby absorbing into her self and her own sphere grandmother's estate.

For some time I stand around at Maa's back. My mind is far from restful, so other things do not find a place in it.

The sooji is reddening. Maa's wrist is moving fast. She draws closer to herself the ready measured amounts of sugar

and water. Now she is engrossed in the precision task of cooking.

I postpone still farther the thought of asking her about my photo, and stroll out. In the open courtyard a piece of sky above is held captive. Below, rimming the walls lie the lush and full flower beds.

In that green belt lined by bricks I look for the sprig I had brought from Shyamalee's garden to express our ripe and robust relationship.

Shyamalee had thought it a wonderful idea. A grafting of hearts through the medium of flora and foliage, symbols of fertility. Tug and pull as you might, the graft wouldn't come loose. It would become one with the soil.

When I went away, Maa had written that Shyamalee had cried and cried, recalling the tiny plant and the planting. How cruel I was, I'd pulled out the unpullable, broken the unbreakable, left the unleavable. Country. Religion. Love. Maa wrote about this in a muted way. When I probed she'd coughed up a few more details. But how far could I question my own mother? She wasn't my younger sister whom I could bully. If she had been, at least, my elder sister, I could have, maybe, dragged things along a little more. But Didi[14] belonged to another home now; Maa keeps harping on this.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Total silence reigns in the house. There would be little else at half-past eleven in the morning. Maa, the little girl, and the small sounds of their knocking about. These are the only reminders of the gaiety and noise of yesterday — the day of my arrival.

The girl brings out an armchair for me. Placing it she waits for me to sit in it.

"Come here," I beckon to the girl. "I didn't know you were here. I'd have brought you something if I'd known."

"Doesn't matter," she sets me at rest like an elder. Seeing Maa hauling in a big canister she runs up toward her.

"Bring in the basket of peas, too." Maa thrusts another

chore upon the girl, and places a discoloured wooden plank on the floor to sit on by my chair.

Now it's suddenly just Maa and I. Alone. Face to face. Amid the scrapheap of our grievances. I don't know where it will start from: Martha? The letters I didn't write? The distance?

I shrink a little when mother raises her face and looks at me. But before the moment is over and another starts I come down on her.

"Ah, yes. I remember. Kamlee was saying yesterday, wasn't she, that now my photo is not there? But really, Maa, where is it, the one that used to be on the T.V.?"

Maa seems caught off guard. But she says lightly. "You didn't particularly like that photo of yours, did you?"

"Well no, I didn't..." I don't want to tell Maa that Martha says I look like a clod in the photo. A country bumpkin.

From some peculiar chain of association I can't think of that photo without Martha's comment. On a green sprawling expanse an abstracted-looking young man in a loose kurta. What could Maa have found attractive in this picture?

If I see things through Maa's eyes, I become even more confused. And in trying to gather my own vision, away from the likes and dislikes of Maa or Martha, I really get stuck — go clod, country bumpkin.

Have the vibrations emanating from the photo entered me finally?

"Now then, tell me, why was it removed?"

"You tell me."

"You felt that it would fall off: the T.V.'s on the whole day, after all."

Maa bursts into laughter. The laughter brings tears to her eyes. This is the way it is always. When Maa wants to laugh from every pore she ends up crying.

"If that had been my fear couldn't I have just picked it off the T.V. stand and put it some place else?"

I subside a bit. "You were the one who used to say that you wanted that photo in a place where you could see it all the time."

"There are any number of such places in the house." Maa's voice is dry.

"Such as?"

"Such as...." Maa begins thinking.

Not that I don't know which place it is where women spend most of their time. But I pretend not to know. To say it these days is to invite trouble. Nobody can tell a woman in a normal, conversational way that more than half her life is spent in the kitchen. Arguments break out. Everybody fights shy of saying it, true though they know it to be.

Living there has sensitized me to things like this. Of course I can say anything to Maa, even this. She wouldn't in the least mind. Nor would she argue. Nor say bitter things. But just because of this liberty should I tell Maa the things I wouldn't tell another woman?

I want to give her all my love. I want to load her with everything I have, but what few means I have!

She has dozens of means — here's halva for you, just for you. This chutney is for you. This bedspread here, you're bound to like. Here's a cassette for you. Here's the karaunda[15] pickle.

What do I have that can speak the refrain always beating in my heart, the refrain, 'Maa will like it'? What is the thread here, that is my own, and can weave the web of my feelings?

Coming back after these many years, I feel everything has been going on as well without me. The house has accepted my absence, is not pining for my presence. The tasks considered exclusively my charge have been going on in my absence too, as smoothly.

I remember once Bhaiya made me go out a second time. A winter night. A full half-hour after nine. "Don't you know that getting brown bread is your job? Chintoo leaves early and your highness isn't awake then." The light bill. Papa's doctor. The instalments on the house. The bank. And with all this, college.

"Just because of this Vespa you've bought me you treat me like a pack animal." One day, I remember, I made a scene. I remember, too, the dressing down I got from Professor

Sharma in college. I hadn't done my tutorial. Professor Sharma gave me a talking-to before the whole class. I stood mute.

Asit had told me when we came out. "You are an ass. Who cares for these masters? Just give me the word. I'll fix him."

"No, Asit. The fault is mine." Asit kept up an angry mutter, and I couldn't believe what I'd done: how on earth had I forgotten that the tutorial had to be given in on Tuesday?

"Actually, yaar, at home, you know..."

I stopped short, catching myself before launching on my laments. To Asit, at that?

That day I realised bitterly that I had just too much on my shoulders. Nobody at home was so much as aware that it was my final year in B.A. The Vespa did nothing. I saved time all right getting to the university, but the saved time was spent running errands for the household. How mad I used to get, crying myself hoarse that they should draw up a list, help me get through everything once and for all.

Now, I wonder: where are those gaps which they used to swear could be filled only by me? All those very important tasks. Those demands of support and the arguments in support of the demands of support. Within a day and a half it is all too obvious that there is nothing very much for me to do. After the ceremony of expressing joy, everyone is busy with himself or herself. The only one left is Maa, showering me with special favours.

If it had been like earlier days I would have thought that her behaviour was just part of being Maa. I would have sat on, smug and sure that by accepting all that she was giving me, I was doing her a tremendous favour — that I was bestowing upon her space for the waters of her tenderness to flow.

Now I see what uncouth behaviour it is, what crass terms of give and take. I, the receiver, dead sure that the giver is overjoyed and eager to give. Taking as my birthright the giver's natural and simple generosity.

The gracelessness of it would never have come home to me if I had not been subjected to the strict accounting of

lending and borrowing operating there. Nothing over there can be taken for granted. There's an arithmetic in relationships, even in the close relationships of mother and father, brother and sister, husband and wife. Feelings are expressed in quantitative terms, unceasingly. Is this the reason for the smooching and mouthplay that goes on there all the time and so sickeningly? In the beginning this was so difficult to take that I asked Martha straight, "What is this... this smooching and licking all the time? If you keep on at a thing doesn't it go flat? All this buzzing around the ear all the time makes the sap run dry."

"Are you innocent or plain dumb?" Martha clung to me extra hard. "If there's no steady supply of you know what, a guy will just move off. There are incitements on all sides, takers all around, each peppier than the other."

The fear of losing, being walked out on. Ever-present and terrifying. But wrapped and covered. I thought of people far away, simple and silent behind closed walls, untouched by the artfulness of overt love.

What was the force, the something, that kept them going through thick and thin, bad times and good times?

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Maa opens the canister precipitately. She probably does this to break my brooding . There must be at least ten to twelve kilos of rice in the huge canister.

I try to assess the amount of time it would take to pick this mountain of rice, and study Maa minutely. Crumpled sari. Salt and pepper hair. At the corners of the mouth, a fold of flesh that looks as if it's about to fall off. The tips of the fingers chapped, ground down, screaming out the life they have led. Who would say that Maa retired as the principal of a famous college? Where are the signs of the position she held?

"What are you looking at?"

"You."

I reach out and enclose her chapped right hand in my fist.

I am seated in just the right position to clasp her hand. I am in an easy chair and she is sitting relaxed on the wooden plank. I run my fingers over the pores and nails of her chapped hand. I want to see Maa's face in that instant, but cannot do so. It is uncomfortable to turn to look.

I cannot break this togetherness. Maa, mother, is flowing towards me in an invisible and inexplicable way. What a lot she is saying. Taking me far away from the rough, chapped skin of her hand, very far away.

This is something I have understood only after coming back here. To go beyond touch, even while touching. Touching the far-off, absent things, becoming one with them wholly. How edgy Martha used to get at this.

"All of a sudden... Why? Where do you go off like this?"

Moving her leg, plastered against my thigh, she abruptly lets me go from the circle of her arms.

I know she does this to make me bounce back to herself. Gives me a push to make me lurch back to her. She doesn't see that if I was with her, why would I go anywhere else? She does see it, in those rare moments when she gets that far into me, but mostly it's the give and take of the body between us. So much stays stubborn and inert below the ground. Riding the crest of fast-flowing water, you never get the time to absorb this rich deposit below. And life. Life remains a definition of the outward and the evident.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Maa's hand stirs uneasily in mine. Has she read my reverie? Is she more sensitive than Martha? I feel awkward, shy. To cover my shyness I draw her hand closer and take it to my lips. My fist unclenches now.

The moment gives me release, takes me far away even from Maa. Is that why I am able to turn my face and see her?

I pull at her crumpled sari pressed between her knees.

"Not had your bath yet. Dirty, stinking mother! Call you that, shall I?"

"Bathing and washing and this and the other. They'll go

on. They go on. I thought I'd sit with you a bit. You are free now?"

"No, not free." I stretch the 'no' and 'not.' "Haven't taken up the newspapers yet."

I want to know *everything* that is going on here. I am hungry for it all. Impatient to compare and contrast.

I do not want to tell Maa about the many many ends and strands of myself I have to gather to be at ease. To be myself. Just myself. In control. Be just the me that I never become. Never become here, never manage it there. A whole country squats in my consciousness. A whole culture, a whole society, a whole tradition of being and doing, through the medium of Martha. Martha it is who brings the country into the chambers of my mind. I can seal off the doors, windows and vents for all I am worth, but it's no use. If Martha is, all the rest are too.

If Maa wants, she can understand these things. She can distinguish between the aloneness of nearness and the aloneness of distance. But will she? If I raise the subject, she will say promptly, "It's by these buffetings of your 'aloneness of this' and 'aloneness of that' that you have been laid low. Been sunk."

Sunk. This decisive word had hit me like a brick when she'd used it the first time. Of course, I knew it wasn't exactly wrong. I might have used it myself, to define myself, but my meaning would have been different from Maa's. Its needle on the scales wouldn't have been on the same point as hers.

"Get the newspapers from Kamlee if you want to." Maa takes up from what I'd said earlier.

"No. I can just as well read them at night."

A question slips itself into my mind. I can see the path down which it is making its way. How will Maa receive this question, I wonder.

"Listen. Tell me something. Can you distinguish between the fear of the void and loneliness? I mean between a mind become void and loneliness?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Just asking."

"Has your mind become a void?"

"No. It's something old now. Happened in those days when I was new out there."

A film of sadness sweeps her face. "When have you ever told me about your days there?"

"I haven't even told Martha."

"Why not? Why?"

Maa looks anxious. She waits for me to go on. There's hope in her waiting that whatever I haven't said till now will at last get said without strain, that she will be spared the labours of coaxing it out of me. I have a good idea why Maa hopes and wishes this. I had taken my decision about Martha without telling them, my parents. Not "taken" the decision, actually. The decision had just come about.

On her face, Maa wants to keep alive the stamp of pain at being made an outsider. But this pain is integral to our relationship. It can't be thrown away like broken glass.

Seeing me silent, she pours a small heap of rice from the canister on the brass thali[16]. I know that she will now pick the rice with great concentration. Every pinch of husk that she picks up, she will not just throw away, but squeeze and crush between her fingers, prod with her thumb. Rend me with her silence.

When will this silent reproach end? Won't somebody, sometime, ask why a person does what he does? Why he doesn't do the things expected of him? I grant that doing the things expected of one is commendable. But if one can't ... can't...?

Maa can at least ask why I did what I did with Shyamalee. Why did I rub off a growing relationship with her like rubbing off something on a slate? The raw strength of the events that made me wipe off the relationship, can it be summed up in a few words?

Miles away from home, and always the feel of your own slimy feet, beslimed by your own blood. A handful of weeping, snivelling words couldn't have bridged the distance. Even when I tried to write the words, the mocking face of Papa would rise up before me. How was I to tell him that his

seafaring son had not just left the shore but lost it?

My sores, once hidden, have remained hidden. How can I tell them of what I had been having to cope with? My nights, often spent in the cold outside. In the daytime, selling candy. For a few cents filling cars at petrol pumps. Washing crockery in hotels. Hawking on footpaths the mufflers of Kullu, and the costume jewellery of Gujarat. I have nothing to add to family glory. I have nothing. I had nothing.

I hadn't been able to tell even Martha how I had been washed ashore to her doors. Day and night I had felt a voracious hole spreading in the dead centre of my belly, opening its maw wider and wider. To come to its full circumference it was pushing at my ribs. It would rest only after crushing my bones.

Often, on the verge of sleep, I'd feel I was about to be strangled, that even a scream wouldn't escape me. That I'd be left mewing. And who'd hear even if I did scream?

Heaven knows if it was Martha who found me or I who found her. It was eleven o' clock in the morning when she left me in the dungeon-like basement that she'd found for me and that passed for home.

Immediately on opening the door she had pointed at the ventilator above and said, "There's snow out there. You can look at the snow from where you are lying."

How could she know that not just the beauty of snow, but beauty of any kind, was not for me at that time. If pressed, I could have just about managed to express gratitude to her.

The night before, passing through the subway, a huge black had come straight up to me and given me a blow on the tip of my nose. I had hardly recovered from the twanging that ran all through my body when he snapped his fingers in front of my eyes and shouted, "Take out all you have, pig."

Not his twisted speech but his action brought his meaning to me. Tottering against the wall and trying to stay on my feet, I emptied my pockets. The subway exit coin was all that fell down, ringing with a hollow peal. Now he stretched out his arm and picked me up by the collar of my windcheater. With his steel-heavy arm he hoisted me up in the air and

flung me down. "You bloody swine," he swore and kicked my face with the tip of his boot and walked off.

When I opened my eyes I found myself at Zenith Photographers. Martha told me later that her partner had carried me on his back to the studio. Carried me on his back? I was surprised. It was against my experience here. Whatever happened on the road, murder, killing, robbery, rape, the passer-by stuck to his job of passing by. Kindness? And to a coloured at that? Impossible.

Later Martha told me that the reward for an empty pocket was a bash up, like this. Best to keep something in the pocket always, to shut these dogs up. This was a new lesson to me in the uses of money. But whether for giving or living, money remained my immediate problem.

Seeing me open my eyes, Martha put aside the prints she had in her hand and bent over me.

"Are you O.K.?"

"Yes."

A customer came in for prints. Through with him, she asked, "You have work?"

"No." I shook my head. The motion set off a clanging all along my vein. Why did Martha's presence seem like an infliction to me?

I just wanted to beat my head and cry, just soothe my inflamed pores.

"You have a home?" she asked gently.

"Not really."

"Coffee?"

"Yes, please."

This time I tried to say a few more words through my swollen lips.

Martha brought in black coffee from the trolley outside. I didn't want her help getting up, but she extended it.

"You work here?" It was my turn to ask questions now.

"No. Fifty-fifty partnership. I am half owner."

"Half," or "haynph" as she said it, tilting the "a" in her accent, was the famous American word for the nuances and gradations of many relationships: haynph mother, haynph

father, ... son or sister.

"Keep sitting till I finish." She said to me after drinking coffee.

Deftly she moved from studio to darkroom, from darkroom to studio, totally unselfconscious in my presence.

I kept sitting, silent, mute. There was nothing. Nothing within and nothing without. A vacuum surrounded and pressed against me, and in its centre a heap — my body. Beyond this, no sensation.

When about to close the studio, Martha shook me awake. Sometime before she had put me on the long settee outside, used for taking photographs. I must have slept heavily. That afternoon Martha had turned away all customers. She told me some days later.

She just worked at the counter.

Dropping the shutter of the studio, she said, "If you want, you can get work here."

"How will I work here? I stay far away in New Jersey. Under the bridge, in the slum area. It's far off."

"If you work here you can live here too."

That night I slept in Martha's apartment. The next day, before leaving for the studio she took me to the "abode with kitchen and bathroom" that she found for me. Around eleven o'clock in the noon, pointing with her finger at the view outside the skylight she said, "Look, just lying here, without stirring, you can see the snow."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Avoiding Martha's eye, I took stock of the "abode with kitchen and bathroom."

A very low ceiling. Joined to the stained sink a small platform. Two shelves rising up as high as the ceiling. A battered fridge. Swarms and swarms of cockroaches. Some utensils scattered, their rims daubed with the remains of meals eaten by God knows who, when. From the ancient carpet on the floor rose a smell of fried eggs that seemed woven into it.

Martha was impatient to be off, now. Her impatience

broke my survey work. When she left I sank into the sofa. If I kept standing, I felt, the ceiling that almost touched my head would crush me. Lying down flat seemed safer.

I stretched out, but the platform near the sink seemed to roll onto my chest. So near was it that the right turn of the sofa bed scraped it in its spread outward. By the side of the platform was a boiler. From it, two huge pipes tore through the ceiling, passing into the floor above. They seemed to be for warmth and hot water for the people in the major portion of the house.

Sharing the room with this stream of fire, sweat oozed out of me. In these winter days of snow and ice. I tried to steal the cold of the snow that Martha had pointed out to me. From the sofa on which I lay, I caught sight of two rows of barbed wire cutting the piece of sky visible through the ventilator. It was hard to imagine, trapped in the room, that outside the door, it was so open that drifts of snow formed on the ground continually.

When and how long I slept I did not know. A din woke me.

Martha. She had come in with the help of the spare key, pushing the door open. A very cold draught and scissorings of vermilion coloured neon lighting entered the pitch dark room with her.

She turned on the light the moment she came in and threw her overcoat on the back of the chair. The kettle stood on the cold gas ring.

I remembered.

Some time ago, in the effort to be up and about a bit, I'd put the kettle of water on the gas, and not finding a lighter, had stretched out again on the sofa.

Martha's switching on the light meant "get up." But I wasn't able to. I felt ants were crawling all over me. My head was so heavy and dense that I wondered if my shoulders could bear its weight if it sank.

"Lazy bum. Get up. Still sleeping." She flung away the bag on her shoulder and tried to pull me up from the hollow of the sofa.

Her effort went wide, so she curled up near me and ran her fingers over my brows.

I sat up with a jerk. I thought she was giving me an unwanted view of some private part of herself.

She got up too. Taking out her purse from her bag she said, "Here's your forty dollars. Sold a jacket."

"To whom?"

"How does it matter to whom? If you wish you can keep the rest of the jackets in the studio. They'll sell," she said it all in dry, matter-of-fact tones.

Now she took out a brush from her purse and hurriedly ran it through her hair. Then a mirror with a small handle. She put a new coating of colour on her lips. Then she tied a scarf round her head. It was preparation for meeting the cold icy wind outside.

I panicked.

Martha was about to go. Martha would go away. I would be left. Here. Squeezed by the low ceiling and the hot pipes.

"Like to go somewhere? Out? Let us celebrate... Just today," I cajoled. I pushed towards her the money lying on the sofa. It was bait for making her stay, otherwise I'd have clutched the notes in my hand and thrust them into my breast pocket.

"N-n-n-no. Not today." She faltered a bit. "Someone is waiting. I have to get home."

A small but hard blow. On the chest. Not at her going. At my being left alone. Buffeted by the blind winds of ill luck. Shoreless. Alone. Terror sprang awake.

Still sitting I caught between my fingers the hem of her skirt and pulled. A weak, faint persuading. I put it in words too. "Sit for a while. You can go afterwards."

She turned.

"You don't have anyone?"

"No." A bubble caught in my throat.

She sat down, but was on her feet mentally. A stiff, put on courtesy. My panic returned. The tremor in my nerves threw up a question on my lips.

"Listen. Have you ever left your country and gone somewhere else?"

"We don't have to leave our country. Others come to our country. So vast it is."

She spread her hands wide to show vastness and from below the cut sleeves of her jacket two tufts of hair peeped out. The sight made me sick.

"Then how can you know what it's like?"

"What is it like?"

She tried to fold my body in the circle of her arms.

I backed out of her stockading arms. How would she know that there was a pair of scales within me? One side of the scales was made fast to truths beyond the seven seas. On the other side were piled up me, geography, chasm, darkness, and now, Martha. If I left it to the natural justice of the scales it would tilt towards the heavy. Mass would win.

It looked as if Martha had changed her mind about going. She began kissing me. I jumped off the sofa and sat on the floor leaning against the wall. How warm the room was, how chill the wall.

"So you are serious about your question. And sick."

"Didn't I tell you that you wouldn't understand?"

"Come. Let me try to understand."

Seating herself before me she cradled her cheeks in her hands and looked at me fixedly. A small flame glowed in each eye.

"No. It's impossible for you to understand. The little things which the mind craves for. Familiar things — shops, signboards, roads, the colour of the sky, voices, children and old people, the colour of faces. It misses everything. Everything. But do you know what it gets instead? From all directions? Difference. Unending difference. For some time it's interesting. But then emptiness squeezes you. Each minute I feel I'm somewhere else, somewhere outside, alone."

"What's all this nonsense? I thought you'd talk about your parents and your grandma."

"Didn't I say you wouldn't understand? Do you understand distance? And what it is to feel distance between your ribs? You feel that if you call, the sound will reach late. If I walk I feel I'll reach home late. If a letter is sent it'll reach

late. Anything can happen, any day, any time. I feel I'll get stuck somewhere, anywhere, everywhere. All that I see in this country — its wealth and poverty, pomp and show, friendship and hostility — nothing touches me. Nothing seems mine."

Bored, she said I was crazy. A sentimental fool. Ever ready to hallucinate. And then, coyly, she said it was because I didn't love. If I loved, this rubbish I talked...

Throwing a sidelong glance at me, she sank her hands under my arms. Slowly she dragged me away from the wall, and lay me on the floor and covered me with the full length of her body.

Again, everything shrouded over. Within me flashed into view the steps that came down to different terminals. Outside, my body did its job.

Martha was gratified. She began to make coffee. She put on the kettle and went into the bathroom. The gurgle of the kettle echoed in my stomach. She brought out the coffee, and first put the mug against my lips.

"Where's your mug?"

"My mug?" She laughed vivaciously. She took a sip from my mug and offered it back to me. Now she, now I. In the middle, a big heavy fluted mug.

A killing sadness descended into me. I wanted to shout, 'You are not my answer, Martha, not any answer. You are a leaf of no tree shimmying its way into my lap."

But I did not shout. I did not say anything. If she knew why I stayed with my head buried into her shoulders, she would have just picked up her stuff and gone away. Or maybe not. It was nice to feel that one was wanted. It went with the culture here.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

In the studio there were Robert, Martha and I. There was a perceptible hierarchy here. Robert was both owner and manager. He sat on a chair kept apart and meant only for him. He handled the cash.

Martha looked after everything inside and outside the studio. I was mostly in the darkroom. General help.

Robert had suggested paying me one hundred and ten dollars a week. I had sulked. Martha pressed my toe with her foot. She had the pay hiked by twenty dollars. I waited for a fuller explanation from her for pressing my foot. She knew my plight. Two instalments of the rent arrears left by Prashant were still pending.

When Robert left she asked me, "What do your problems mean to others? How can anyone pay you more? You don't have a green card. The first thing any employer will think is spend money teaching the sod the job and run the risk of his running off."

Martha didn't know the many things that kept hissing into me continually, "go back!" And I, paralysed. The roads were open, but how frozen my feet.

I knew only too well that a green card was a trump card, a winner's card. As long as I didn't have it "cheap labour" would be stamped on my forehead. My self respect, what I had left of it, would be getting more sullied.

Martha comforted me, seeing my limp face. Don't worry, she said, in a few days she would get a me a raise of fifty dollars. She would also pay the two remaining instalments of the rent. She would take it back from me later.

I should have realised that she would realise her money's worth, certainly realise it.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

One day, sometime later.

We were dipping negatives in hypo solution when Martha seized my hands, sopping wet in the water tray, and whispered into my ear: "I like Indians. They are so faithful."

I had no ready answer. I just thought what about that other one, that some one who was waiting for her the other day? Had he gone? Ditched her?

I tried to read the answer on her face. In the faint red glow of the darkroom her face couldn't be seen. But even in the

tray of cold water I could feel her quick hands darting like fish.

And right then, raising herself on her toes, she kissed my ear lobe. My skin flamed. But I was determined not to react.

She wasn't discouraged. I don't know why. Stealing up on me from behind, she brought both her arms round my sides and locked them over my chest. Squeezed. And then sprang away and out of the studio. Lucky she went out. My back was on fire. My tension eased with her going.

Leaving the prints I went up to a high stool against the wall and sat on it. Leaning against the wall I closed my eyes and bathed my hands in the thin shafts of air in the studio. I tried my best to reach out to some place away from the studio. Somewhere out, far out, in the other land where bells reverberated.

But it was quiet there.

Dead quiet. Or perhaps my antennae had grown weak? Was I dizzy?

Why was my call not heard?

Martha came into the studio. She must have kicked open the door of the darkroom. For she had a big packet in her left hand and in the right two long bars of chocolate.

Something broke within me with a clatter. I didn't know what.

The smell of hot hamburgers escaped from the brown packet and ran amuck in the narrow confines of the studio. MacDonald's hamburger — beef, most likely. Beef, that is, the meat of the cow. If you called it beef it didn't seem like cow's meat. There was no recoil.

Martha opened the wrapper and thrust an icecream into my mouth. And then she picked up my hand from my lap and wound my fingers round the stem of the icecream.

"Let's eat the ice cream first. It'll melt otherwise," she said. She opened the second wrapper, sat down on her stool, and began eating her ice cream, dangling her legs. A very bright and vivacious look played on her face.

From then on a certain something began to be enacted upon me. I had been selected. Without me doing the

selecting. I had begun to take it, suffer it.

Why wasn't I able to tell Martha that I didn't want it? Or was it that I did?

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"Where are you? Be here. At least as long as you are here."

Mother sounds sore. Could be a carryover of our last talk. She still seems unhappy at my silence about my "early days there."

In the times before I left, she'd never have initiated a conversation.

She would have waited for a move from me, first. She could wait. Now she cannot. She is hungry to sift and store into herself my presence here, shred by shred, fibre by fibre. A consuming hunger for me, her second son, and last born, has stayed in Maa's life. With everyone else my relationship has been stored away in a cupboard, like clothes.

"You are right. Just give me a shouting when I begin to look blank."

"But where were you? Over there?" She steers clear of mentioning Martha by name.

"Where else? It's a small world. a damned small world."

"Small world? Yours?"

"You too? All right, go ahead, you too. Go on about the wonders of living there. As if I'm not just I, one man, but the whole of America. On the go always, fast, faster, faster yet."

Now it is a familiar terrain of dread for me. A slope without stop signs. I have to turn back from it. I pick up the subject of the photo instantly.

"You never did tell me why you removed that photograph from there."

"O-O-O-Oho! You are dead set on that one thing!"

How does Maa know where it hurts me? The others, of course, have done what they have, but Maa, too? Shoved me into a corner like a soiled sheet?

"Come, tell me."

I can't really press her, since it concerns me exclusively. But I do press. And Maa begins to laugh. I like to see her laugh. It's like clouds lifting.

With the laughter comes, as usual, a flood of tears, Drenching her.

"All right. Guess," she says, wiping her eyes.

I make a show of guessing. Perhaps I want that Maa should stay seated there in front of me as she is, awash in her own happy flood of tears. That she should keep whirling on her own axis. Maa, so childlike, and yet so big.

How strange. It's a full house — there's Papa, there's Bhaiya, his wife, their children. But I feel my reach is confined to Maa. Maybe I am wrong.

As a child I had a body language with Maa. Now this language has lapsed. Now my body is associated only with Martha. The rights of Martha are tattooed on it. As soon as you are grown up, your name and your calling are branded on your body. And there's no going back from there. From a child you can become a man, but from man to child, never. It's only the mother principle that is fixed, on its own axis, and is beyond time.

Martha's partner, Robert. I once had an exchange with him on this. That day, as it wore on, a long letter from mother had arrived. Reading it, I had become unmoored. And I said on an impulse, "There's no book in the world in which the mother doesn't figure. For the mother is not an individual, but a timeless concept. That's why she looks the same to everyone. She rouses the same feelings everywhere."

Robert laughed his snickering laugh. "You Indians romanticise everything. O.K, yeah, your mother is your guiding star when you are a child. But haven't you noticed how quickly we grow up out here? We run, want to get away."

Why don't you say also that every fourth year the mother changes, the retort came to the tip of my tongue, but I bit it back. If I started a fire it'd probably scorch me, finally. Even otherwise, Robert was an angry chap. Wore his American patron power like a windcheater.

"We have no such problems in our country." I stayed calm.

"In any case how can you compare when you haven't set foot on the shores of the country you compare yourself with?"

"Comparison is not possible, anyway, with a country of snake charmers and sadhus[17]." He expanded the reference.

"That's right. Comparison is not possible." I was burning with the effort to contain my anger. "Because to compare you must know some inner facts about the country. That's why you people keep making your odysseys there, to find out, in spite of yourselves."

"I would correct you there, mister. Not we people, but you people. You people keep running out here. The evidence is right here before me." He wagged a finger at me. "There must be some good things to us, all said and done."

I slowed down, but didn't give up. "There are some good things everywhere. And the wise know how to put these good things to good use. But your wise don't know the basic facts even about themselves."

"Who says so?"

"This!"

A column in *The New York Times*. I spread the paper before him. It was the gist of a report on the general knowledge of American children, worked on for two months. Its verdict was that the children knew next to nothing about other countries. "Poor" and "Very Poor" were how they had been rated.

"Why should our children know about these things?"

"Up to you." I shrugged him off. I threw away the can of Pepsi. Stepping out to the lawn, I took deep breaths. In fifteen minutes from now I'd have to be coping with this cad in the studio.

I didn't see any great difference between Robert and Martha.

Robert and Martha.

Martha and Robert.

The names looked like a single compound word. The same language, the same country, the same colour, the same mind. Heaven knew from what sixth sense I knew that Robert had smelt the state of affairs between Martha and me. Time and again he threw it at Martha, but it was Martha's problem. I

wanted none of it. I gave Robert his due as half-owner, no more. To stay stuck to your work was a good tactic. You had to learn it at any cost here. If you didn't, or couldn't, you had to be ready to be thrown aside. You got no rope. That was not the system here. All labour, yours, everyone's, was a donation to the country. That was how it had won its mega-position of super power.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Maa tolerates my spells of silence for some time, but not for long. That my time is limited here, and therefore to be rationed well, she never forgets.

"You there, mooning away, why don't you write more? I fob off your father with some excuse but it doesn't mean that..."

"I just don't write. No particular reason..."

"Martha objects, I suppose." Maa prods me.

Martha? Who is she to object? I don't even know how long she's going to stay in my life. But I don't say this to mother. I say, instead;

"No, why should she object? None interferes with none there. Live or die, it's your own life."

"Then what is it?"

A slope. Maa does not know that no truth can be wholly recounted standing on this slippery ground, nor that no answer can be given to a question so big and yet so small.

Can she ever know what it is to sink in your own axis, without a periphery? To be smeared always by the slime under your feet? These things are not so lovely as to be shared and recounted.

"You haven't told me why."

"What can I tell you. I do phone often." I am evasive.

"This is something beyond me. Phone calls cost money."

"You don't feel the pinch, really. It's just a few hours' earnings."

"And you don't phone home. You phone the office. Your father tells us whatever he wants to."

"Why wouldn't he tell all?"

"What he tells *is* all, probably. And how much can I squeeze out of a two or three minute talk?"

"You're right. I'll keep it in mind."

Immense pity for mother begins to rise in me. Its shadow spreads over me and then moves across to her. I want to seize mother's hand again, but fight shy of the touch. Just now her hand is lying still over the small heap of rice on the platter, while her eyes are fixed on me.

My eye meeting hers makes her waver. "Oh, let's stop this talk. It's just that I'd assumed you'd gone for good."

There's a tremor in her voice.

The door bell rings. Maa rises up swiftly to open the door. Kamlee would have attended to it, so why does she? For cover?

The maali[18] has come. Apart from the small garden outside there are two small flower beds in the courtyard within. One is a tangle of mint turning green form ochre-brown. The other is supine, holding up the feet of the climbing vines.

As soon as he sees me the maali balloons with joy. Oh, so Kunwar Saheb has come!"

"Kunwar Saheb? What's that? Who's that?"

"You." Maa replies.

"Me? Why me? I want to fling this word away like a scorpion.

"The maali is from Rajasthan. He naturally calls you Kunwar Saheb."

The maali protests. "Nothing specially Rajasthani about it. If Dada had been living you'd have been called Kunwar in every lane and by-lane."

The title of Kunwar — the little master, the princeling, the heir apparent — makes heavier still the weight of my poverty. Even in a state of penury a boy of this clime can without embarrassment be addressed as "princeling." He can deck himself with his forefathers' once bright crown.

Even if you are a zero you can add a one to it and make it ten here. But there? Each one for himself and himself alone.

"Salaam Kunwar Saheb."

The maali salutes with his hand at his forehead.

Then he gets busy with his shovel.

Within me a pounding begins.

Shyamalee! Where? In which fibre of this raked earth are you? What roots would this shovel be plucking out? How many layers of earth will it undo?

The maali's hands are sifting the earth fast, in fistfuls. Are the plants being maimed by the blade of his shovel?

Suddenly I am put in mind of Hayama Moshiko's story "A Letter." Shame overcomes me that I don't measure up to the girl in the story, working in the cement factory.

"This soil in the beds, it remains good, doesn't it?" I ask the maali.

"No, Kunwar Saheb! Every six months the soil manures have to be changed. They become hollow. Bahu jee[19], it's time for new soil and also more manure."

"Yes, next month," Maa answers him calmly.

I tremble like the sea.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Suddenly I feel drained.

I find myself saying to mother "What if I go out for a stroll?"

I am hoping, too, to get a call from Vaseem. When he sends word I'll have to go and meet him. I have not told anyone this condition of my visit. I have set my face against the ease of openness. I don't know why.

As soon as I talk of stepping out of the house, Maa's head, hands, shoulders mime "no no no." She pleads, refusing any cut in her time with me.

"In just a little while your Bhabhi and children will be back..."

I sit down again on the chair halfway through getting up. I try to bask in my own importance.

"Very well, I won't go. Now tell me what you want to."

Such direct asking makes mother ill at ease. She says, backing away,

"No, no. If you want to go, go. I'll do something else in the meanwhile. To tell you the truth, ever since you came I haven't been able to fix my mind on anything. Not even pooja[20]... Today in the morning..."

"O.K. Don't do anything for some days now..." I try to console Maa, but in my mind take stock of the cycles of work I have left behind back there, cycles that grind away, wearing you down. Coercing. Knocking you down. Over there this wear and tear is the only proof of your youth, called your prime of life. Old age is a cruel liability. The old are pushed aside in this mad, neurotic hurry. The wealth of experience of the old is shut away in old people's homes.

Maa used to tell us a story in childhood. At a certain wedding feast old people were not admitted, so the young men and women of the village hid their old in a big drum and carted it along. Their worry was that if the old were not with them how would they weather sudden danger?

I want to know the nature and character of the danger they feared.

"Maa. What was the story you used to tell us about the old people being carried to the wedding feast in a drum?"

She looks at me amazed. "What are these stories you are raking up?"

"Must be the water here. Drags you back to the past immediately on setting foot here! Makes you think up all the stories by and of your forefathers. Everything becomes huge and foregrounded."

Maa looks at me fixedly. "Aren't you happy there, son?"

"Nothing like that. Why shouldn't I be happy?"

"You think your droopy voice expresses joy? Has anything happened between you and Martha?"

I don't answer, but my forehead burns.

"I asked something." Maa prods me.

"No, nothing at all the matter between me and Martha."

I say this emphatically. And I have to be emphatic. I do not want to forget that Martha is only my responsibility. I cannot make her a feature and problem of the family.

"It looks as if your heart is not there, really. Your

attention wanders." Maa doesn't let go.

"Do I have the time for letting my attention wander? I'm yoked to work, bound hand and foot. You don't know what it's like. Keep running, just keep running, you have to, no matter the bankruptcy of the mind you reap."

Maa stares at me for a moment and then hesitantly asks, "Do you ever regret it all?"

"N-no." I have to gather all my strength to say the word.

What a deadly silence! Has what I said about the destitution of the mind thrown mother in a whirlpool?

Thoughtfully she asks the question she has been wanting to ask all along, in a soft voice:

"Have the two of you decided to remain just two?"

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

What a mountain of a question! Looming at me. I ought to have been prepared for it. A wave born from the womb of another wave. A leaf sprouting on the stalk due to fall. A childhood rising from a fatherhood and motherhood. For Maa this is the only sequence. Whether here or there, the rule of generation born of generations is the only enduring rule she recognises. For her it is the only Unchangeable — the sacredness of coming together and the fruition of birth.

Mother does not know, how can she, that rules have broken rules. That right and wrong are completely snarled up by the vagaries of free will. That the things she held unchangeable have turned out the most changeable.

The merest hint that I've had nothing like a marriage ceremony with Martha would knock her down: not just the ceremony of going round the fire, but any ceremony. What difference does it make to the society there whether this drill has or has not taken place? I don't even know what Martha's family is. Nothing, no chance remark from her suggests a family. Martha is one. Just one. Herself. Always one and herself. A point that has no circumference.

I am one too. Beneath the shoreless sky, one. Busy surviving. What I am, what I am not, what I can be, can't be,

or will be, are of no interest to anyone.

I am grasping, at last, some tenets about life, there. I am pushing myself towards them. By these tenets the only yardstick of enrichment is money. The only yardstick of becoming — success. Otherwise you are a dog. Not even a cat. Cats are reared with love and tenderness there. Especially Siamese cats. On the flat, snow-covered fields they roam around the whole night, tails held up. Due to what quirk of atmosphere, I do not know, the night sky there is russet. Snow, cats and russet sky.

"Children help build new bridges. Love deepens. You should think about it." Maa is threshing around in her whirlpool.

"At the moment we've decided against it."

I say this to quieten Maa. I do somehow bring together in my mind what I say and what I hide. But my forehead begins to throb. Seeking cover I pick up the basket of peas. I begin shelling them.

"Leave that be. Do it in America, not here." Maa scolds me both with affection and anger, and snatches away the basket.

I toss the sweet-soft peas into my mouth.

About eight days before I was tc leave Martha had had an abortion. Robert had told me as soon as I reached the studio.

"Hurry. She's calling you at the Woodhaven Home."

She was half sitting, half reclining, on the sofa, head thrown back. She had just come out of the labour room. Her face was a frightful yellow. But the eyes were rested. A groan was choked back and not allowed to escape the lips.

When I came in she told me to get a taxi and then freed me of all obligations despite her dire need for help. It was entirely up to me, she said. If I wanted to, I could go home with her. If not, I was free to return to the studio.

I was shaking with rage. A decision like this, so big, so immense, taken unilaterally, without anybody given any say.

I stayed quiet that day. But the next day I grilled her, sought answers, and she brushed me aside contemptuously.

"Stop talking rubbish. It's *my* body. It is *my* private affair.

My sovereign right."

I fell speechless. Then I went hypothetical in my search for some firm ground of right and wrong.

"Did you do this because we are not married and you are afraid of people around?"

Her laughter grated. Driving into my eyes the hard points of her blue pupils, she said, "Who cares? Listen, let me tell you something. You see those two pipes in your cellar? They are for the folks upstairs. It gives them warmth, heat their water. Not you, but them, those folks above, who are kept safe from being scorched by the heat of the pipes. The one to be scorched is you, scorched day and night, but has anyone ever found out who this wretch moled in down here is? You haven't even seen them stoking the pipes. They do that by opening the vent outside on the wall. You are taking their shit but without so much as a by your leave. Get it?"

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Heaven knows how old Martha was. Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four... heaven knows. A toughness sprang from her body and stayed put on her face. It was always there. The expression changed when the urgencies changed, but the toughness remained, stayed put.

How did she manage to go through life? Was it the maturity of meeting the challenges of life head on at eighteen?

The fragment of a memory winged across me.

During the days when she was my domineering chaperone I had said to her, "It's not like this in our country. Our girls are utterly gentle, for they are so protected."

Lying by my side, Martha had sat up, enraged. She didn't find sleeping with me in the hot dungeon of my room as frightful and hateful as the words I uttered.

"Protected? You mean women? Here they have to fend for themselves by eighteen. Look for a home. Search for a man to live with, and do you think all this can be done nesting in mama's lap? After eighteen it's time for your second abortion.

Just tell me, Mr. Wise, how can and why should women live protected?"

I was terrified. Did one search through the medium of the body, too? Was Martha searching through the medium of *my* body?

"One more thing I haven't told you as yet." Martha elaborated on the theory of her paramountcy over her body. There was a sportive, teasing look on her face this time. "I had an amniocentesis done. 'Boy,' they said. I didn't think twice. Get off me, bastard, I said. Why should I want to increase their tribe, the bastards. We've played doormats to them for centuries."

"All right. Wipe out the bastards. But for this and that, every now and then, you do need the bastards, wouldn't you say?" I bantered. But there was a ringing in my head. This was an extreme situation. Completely unfamiliar to me. Martha had killed an occasion meant to be celebrated.

If I had wanted to, I could have worn this as a feather in my cap, my only feather. I could have told them at home of the birth of their grandson, however ignoble and contempt-
ible my role had been in the event.

"You always think in circles," Martha accused me, warning me thereby that she did not care for such questions.

Didn't I know how weak her stomach was for the deeper truths?

She sank into the armchair in the lounge as soon as we came in, after climbing the steps. And in the effort of sitting she suppressed a groan. No desire to make the other hear your groan or see your bruise; how and why were these people so free of these human instincts? And why was Martha that way with me too? Did my foreignness inhibit her? Was it a Lakshman rekha[21]? Or was her face the face of self reliance, evolved that way and set in that cast?

I observed her apartment with some care that day. Just one, rather nice, longish room. Long windows. Down below, more numerous than people, were cars gliding past. Between the tall buildings on both sides of the road, the sky shone like a thin blue trail. In the same room were bed, sofa, fridge,

everything.

The curtains were gaudy and hurt the eye. I said so. She retorted, "*I* like them. *I* find them cheerful."

Comments on tastes. Careful one had to be on this score too, I realised then. The line marking off personal preferences was as important as all the other no-tresspass signs and lines, I learnt.

"Tea? Coffee? Beer? Anything?" Anything I could get her? I asked Martha. She said "no" to everything and tottered up to the window to look.

Viewed from the back, her smallish frame appeared light and fleet, but divided into two segments. Black skirt and grey top. Her head, resting against the glass of the window, and tipped forward, seemed like a third segment of her length.

I had no idea how it happened. The shadow of a tall, lithe form slid along the folds of the curtains and leaned against the window. It cut through Martha. All the three varicoloured sections of her were cut through by a single-hued sari of lilac with yellow edging, falling low down the back.

I was shaken. Was Dame Destiny so fluid and elastic that she could be this way and that together? Didn't she have her weighing scales? Reputed all-powerful, she should speak to us, tell us, which way to tilt. Why did she always operate close-mouthed and out of sight?

If I had asked mother, she would have told me at once where to tilt. Was that why I did not ask her? Just gave her the dutiful information of "marriage" with Martha? Evaded everything else?

And exactly at this moment, with Shyamalee a phantom in my mind, mother asks, "Has Shyamalee ever written to you? She did take the address from me, I had only Prashant's address then. Tell me, do you ever think of her?"

A tremor goes through me. What has mother done? Shaken every leaf of an already shaking branch.

At any other time I would have said decisively, "No, never," and buried the past. But at this moment, guile weakens. I go lax. Without wanting to, I speak eye to eye with her.

"Do you know, once..."

Mother's face gleams with curiosity. If I had been staying here, would there ever have been such desperate seekings and sharings? But now she devours every scrap of information I give her.

She is waiting.

I wonder if I really want to tell her what I'm telling. How, once, Martha had gone to church making me sit on a bench in the park and returned after one hour and a half.

"Making you sit? Are you a child?"

"It wasn't that. I had high fever. I was shivering, and, well, Martha needed the one jacket we did have."

Mother listens with raised, attentive face. "But why was there only one jacket?"

"Forget that. At that time, sitting in the thin sun and the sharp wind I wondered all the time what Shyamalee would have done in Martha's place."

"What, in your opinion?"

"Not gone to the temple. Or she and I both would have gone."

"Not necessarily. Things are changing here, too."

"Don't tell me that." I am roused. "I've also heard this nonsense, but I don't want to know anything about such things."

"You mean you just want to be an ostrich?"

"Perhaps. The skies won't fall if I think like this and not like that."

"The skies may not fall, but won't you fall? Fall behind the times? Be backward in such a forward country?"

Mother laughs. The sight of her thin-curving lips hurt me tremendously.

"Do you go to church?"

"She leaves it to me."

"You don't really give all, do you? Not giving all, how can you get all?"

"What do you mean?"

"Think." Mother stands up. Why she has gone, I don't know, but she has left a puzzle for me to work out.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"How can you get all?"

How?

Why does mother say this?

Does she think I am not getting all of Martha? How does she know?

For me mother's words are only words. I don't know her thought processes. I only know that when I want to know mine I clutch Martha more insistently. The desire in my grip is not equal to Martha's. She threshes like a fish to possess me in my entirety. She tries to drown me. I drown unresisting, and then flay myself. Why did I drown? And then I flay myself for flaying myself: is it necessary for me to save myself from drowning? Why? For whom? What magnet drags me leeward? What is there behind, leewards? What was there? My country? My deysh[22]? What does "country" mean? A name? A piece of geography? An echo? People familiar? Roofs, roads, shops, tunes.. what?

If I have to drown all these things are external. Insubstantial and external. Like the echo of song, the roofing of sky, the coolness of water. They are all there. But not there. Not there in the grasp of the hand.

Then does country mean Shyamalee? Mother? Home?

Country means the sensation of holding something firm in the hand. A continuing, never-ceasing sensation of holding it.

But in my life, the hand and the hold are Martha's alone. And only in Martha's country. The rest I have broken. Left. "Left the unleavable. Broken the unbreakable" as Shyamalee tells mother.

If I want a hand, I must surrender to Martha. Give myself over to her. And then get back all, as Maa says.

But Martha is Martha. Hers is not the hand that holds all of me. I am entangled in Martha's fingers. New to the climate. Stranger to the seasons, the people, their ways. Martha picks me up from the subway. She gets me a house. She gives me a job. She helps sell my jackets. But Martha can also leave me. She can open her hand, her fist. Martha can. Pleadings of mutuality, where, in her country?

Why am I feeling that the fist is opening? Martha and Robert. The same country, the same clothes, the same ways. Partners, real partners. Bumping into each other everywhere. Counter, darkroom, behind the curtains. Bursts of laughter for no apparent reason. These springs must have risen from a joint source, a common source, that is why they gurgle so much.

After two days of convalescence when Martha returned, she told me, dropping what she was doing; "I'm fixing you up at Happy Garments Store. When you come back from home you'll be working there. You'll get money. You make a thousand here. There it'll be twelve hundred. Two hundred more is not to be sneezed at in your circumstances. You can do part-time here too, if Robert is willing."

Maybe it was just goodwill but it didn't seem so to me. Was it my insecurity, or was it that there really was a rat to be smelt?

In spite of it being a Sunday, Martha had gone to the studio. She had put on her gold-bordered jet-black dress, admiring herself before the mirror. On her lips the usual flaming red lipstick. Spread like two petals on her skin, I had been seeing them flutter out towards Robert for a long time.

A Sunday afternoon. The one available day free of work. When I objected authoritatively to her hectic preparations to go out, she lost her temper. "I am not your property, mister. Didn't I do enough?"

I was struck dumb. Was "doing enough" a rope to hang Indians with?

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The sun is high.

Mother hasn't yet come into the courtyard. But Kamlee has, carrying the bucket of washed clothes to hang out. Her salwaar is wet up to the knees.

Wiping the taut clothes-line with a towel, she looks at me, seeking permission. Should she hang the clothes in the courtyard, the place where I sat, and shut out the sky in my eyes?

Are my likes and dislikes, my conveniences and inconveniences, rated so high? I am overcome with love for Kamlee.

She is awaiting my instructions, holding onto the clothes line with one hand. "Amma jee said to ask you before hanging up the clothes."

"And if I say no?" I tease her.

"They'll keep. When you go to sleep I'll hang them up."

This passing event, a non-event, thrills me. Rests me. I lean back and rest my head against the high back of my chair. When I close my eyes all the affection scattered around me comes up close.

From the sounds in the house it looks like Bhabhi is back from work.

Yes. I hear her voice. Bhabhi's face is soft, but voice sharp. Sharp and soft falls of sound. Clatter of plates. Lunch being readied. My mind is at peace, at rest from haste and hurry.

Call for lunch. I've been expecting it. Bhaiya and Papa will not be there. Except for Chintoo the rest are assembled.

Seated beside Bhabhi I feel how small the sphere of com-

munication is between mother and I. Mother wants to tear me apart and enter my inner space. Wants to touch with her fingers the true shapes of my gasps and pains.

"If we'd known earlier that you were coming we would have written to Shikha. She'd have come to meet you. And met us too."

Bhabhi extends the bowl of karhi[23] to me.

"I hardly knew myself that I'd be able to come."

"It's not easy to get leave there, we know, of course."

"Not easy, that's right."

"Still, there must have been some interval between getting the ticket and leaving. You could have written then."

"Could have, but I feel that letters never reach fast and on time. Don't know why I have this feeling."

"Letters don't have to walk here, you know."

Everyone laughs. What an absence laughter has been, I realise, laughing.

"Listen. Go to Banaras one of these days. Just a night's journey. Shikha will be delighted." Bhabhi says.

The limitations of time and my dependence on Vaseem's schedule. Caught between the two a 'no' escapes my lips.

The 'no' hits mother and she stares at me. "Let him be. If he doesn't want to go, he needn't. Write to Shikha. She'll come if she wants to. It's not as though she's not used to his disappearing acts."

This slap! Is it an attempt to see how high the spring will jump if stepped on? How deep you can drive the knife into your near ones?

"Actually, I also have something else to do. I have to go to Meerut." I tell them about Vaseem. Their spirits droop.

"Such a bar on so short a time. Your friend should have understood. Couldn't you have told him that coming home after all these years, your time was your own? You are not a bonded slave, are you?"

"No. Of course not." I seek cover. I say to myself that that's just what I am, a bonded slave. I shift ground. I fix on Shikha.

"For how long hasn't she come?"

"Two years now. She too."

"And I've been away three. Papa was rubbing it in the other day."

"Even now your Papa is not pleased at your staying on there. If you double back here he'll be happy."

"Double back? And the three years I've sweated it out there?"

Was I trying to impress them saying this?

"What do your three years matter? Ground them out you have, somehow. All right, starting from scratch, granted. But here everything is ready and made fast for you."

The swift cobra-spring of possibility! The possibility of staying back! I waver. And I understand, all of a sudden, how water can seep through cement-cased walls.

Bhabhi comes to my rescue. She thinks I'm caught in a genuine practical problem. "Probably you're in the thick of work now. Actually Amma jee wants you to return, only she's putting it in her roundabout way. Aren't I right, Amma jee?" To revive her, Bhabhi bends down and peers at her face.

"Have you skin-dived into my womb or what, ferreting

out all my secrets?" Mother smilingly asks.

This give and take between Bhabhi and mother touches me. Martha would be completely out of place here. An outsider, alien.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The arrangement with Vaseem was that I should phone him two or three days after coming over, and then leave for Meerut.

So I phoned him. He sounded vague. It put me off. "Give me some more time," he hemmed and hawed. "Things are still fluid here, see. Not really fluid... The fact is I have to think a bit. That's what's taking up time."

I knew that Vaseem did not need my physical presence so much as my moral support, just the comfort of knowing I was close by if the whole family came down upon him for a decision. Somebody who could have a long view of things.

"All right then, I'll put the phone down."

He didn't say "yes." Just went on in the same cagey way. "It's all sort of positive here, you know..."

"What about the impression you'd had about her looks and so on? Was it proved right?"

"Yes, that was right alright, but it doesn't seem so important now. Really, looking at everything..."

"Meaning the fuss was all from your side, not from theirs at all."

"Think what you like. But there's weight in their thinking. They do have a point or two."

"But why did they have to decide for you in your absence?"

"They were not wrong, really, doing that. They have a point there, too. I can understand. Your life is there before me as an example."

"All right, then." I put the phone down. And I gave him my neighbour's number. Phone there, I said, leave a message. I'd collect it. Why did I fight shy of giving him Papa's number? I thought about it. It was because I didn't want Papa

nosing into things about me. Vaseem could blurt things out. Or Papa could worm them out of him. And I, caught in my lies... Unsuccessful, pathetic and idiotic.

From Vaseem's talk it seemed that there was no crisis or emergency there. Just normal family exchanges and cosy domesticity.

I lacked the urge to go back home. My feet felt leaden, heavy. Vaseem's words ring in my ears. "There's weight in what they say," he'd said. And he'd also said, that they were not all that wrong in wanting the business settled fast. There too they had a point, he said. Wasn't my life a standing example?

The picture is clear. Their words have weight. For the family has weight. Its a family of means. And of breeding — by the sackful. A family educated too. And without hangups — by and large. Its a family of standing. Of name and worth. There's solidarity in their home, the mores of religion intact yet. What else do you want? Family relationships are relationships of harmony. Like the limbs of a body. On their estate, the family feet are at ease. Not tripping up each other.

Well, well, not just one point, many points, Nusrat's family has. Did it matter, then, if her eye was a little this way, or the ear a little that way? Or her colour more than a shade dun? Or the body not rounded enough? The relationship of husband and wife is based on inner truths, not on outer incidentals. Understand, Mr. Me?

"There too they have a point," Vaseem had said. A whole world lies packed and assembled on this point. Beyond the horizon is a piece of earth. You tear through the skies to get there. Seven seas away it lies, this land, hidden from the eye. Abundant cover it provides, thus. The people are a strange lot there. Money comes first for them. Their ways are a violation of ours. Greed is an easy, downhill slide. Commitment is empty form. Kill or be killed, is the motto. So we put our sons, our little princelings, on the leash when we can. Tether them. Tethered eyes turn on their own axes. Untethered, our princelings will go scrounging among the goods around there and be messed up.

So Vaseem gets his axis. An assurance. A child's rattle placed in the hand. A jhunjhuna. Its tinkle — its *run-jhun* — ever awash in the ear. Who knows, Nusrat, Vaseem's jhunjhuna, may well have been given leave to play her run-jhun by her own cleverly indulgent parents. As for the princeling, upto the ears he'd be in work, but his mind sealed. A satellite, whirling and captive.

I understand fully all that princeling Vaseem says. My parents also gave me a jhunjhuna. But they remained unfortunate.

What am I? An example for Vaseem, a caution to him. I am present by his side and in front of him. But my weight is a non-weight. A leaf blown off by the puffs of Prashant's voice. The target of violence at the hands of a black man. Martha's toy. But Vaseem's shore-up too, even if he didn't think so.

I had an axis. I was getting it, without effort, without strain. Shyamalee was giving it. Support, too, I had. From mother. And father. And brother, from the wind, the colours and the seasons. I had identity — given by the maali, the dhobi[24], the lanes and by-lanes, the flower beds, foods wrapped in fragrance, an expanse spread right up to the bazaar. An expanse of any and everything.

Just one step outside the door I had to take, and I became of them. Everyone's. When I was everyone's none saw me. I was no example to steer clear of. For I too was just everyone, all. Not just one, just a being. A being of Martha's.

I got lost. So lost that I was not even a person. I was an example laid out on the ground for young men to know what to stay away from in the making of their futures.

From the telephone booth to home is a short distance. But I cannot manage it. Have my legs turned to stone? I shall fall for certain, if I keep walking, I think.

At the entrance to the lane is a small parapet. I sink down on it and remain there. Papa would still be at home. On Thursdays he keeps to his room till twelve noon. Bhaiya must be preparing to go. Bhabhi must have gone already.

I can well do without going home.

I wander farther. On the right is Soumya Chatterjee's red brick house. Where would they be, Somu and his sister with her flat nose and bulbul[25] voice? To the left is the bazaar, a square. Steps leading up to the square. At the foot of the steps a cobbler. A push cart. The push cart owner is stirring noodles in a wide-mouthed vessel on the stove. Stirring them fast, the white she-serpents. I burn up. Why not good old sevaian[26]? Why this foreign look-alike, noodles? Copy cat! Ape!

The first shop on the square used to be Ujjwal Dry Cleaners.

Yes, it's there. Then there is a dhaba. Then Paras Chemists. Then a beauty shop.

I know what is ahead. Gupta Provisions Store. Then a ready-made garments shop. Then a stationer's. Then the crockery shop. Then a tailor. An electrical goods shop. Then the glass cabin of a photocopy shop.

After this, cheek-by-jowl with the lane, a by-lane. Then a wide turn. On the turn a stone. And on the stone is carved 'Mandir Marg.' After Mandir Marg is the bus stop. Is it there? Yes! By its side, the paanwalla[27]'s shop with a canvas top fixed to poles. From its eaves a rope lit at one end.

Standing before Ujjwal Dry Cleaners I can see them all. I can see them within me. Walking along the back lane of the chemist's, in a minute I would be at the eateries of samosas[28] and jalebis[29]. Jalebi! Thirsty for syrup! It or I? Both.

I feel my pocket. I have a twenty-rupee note inside. In the morning Papa had pressed it on me.

"Keep it. Not that you don't have your own, but it's probably the wrong currency."

"What'll I do with it?" I had picked up just a twenty rupee note from the pile Papa put before me, so as not to hurt his feelings. He hadn't liked it. The formality between us springs from our chronic state of cold war. He does not think I am mature like bhaiya and didi.

I buy the jalebis. Dancing and bobbing in the karhai of ghee the jalebis are a fascinating sight. On the way back, going past the paanwalla's, the lala recognises me.

"Arre vah, bhaiya jee! Ages since one saw you! Where have

you been?"

"In America these days. Three years now." My chest swells inspite of me.

"It's good times there always, one hears?"

"You hear right."

"And pots and pots of money?"

"Pots and pots, yes."

Ecstatic, he gives me a special banaarsi paan[30]. Stopping midway, he opens the green wrap and sticks something fragrant in it, and then seals it up again.

"Here," I put my hand into my kurta pocket when he rebuffs me.

"Vaa, bhaiya jee, vaah! Don't insult us folks so much. Aren't we fit for even this?"

I pat his shoulder. The paanwalla feels transported to the seventh heaven of delight.

"Don't suppose my lad will ever make it to *there*."

"What's the good of going *there*? Your own country is best."

"You saying this? Why did you go then?"

"Didn't go. Just washed up there."

"How can it be?"

"It can be, it can be, brother. All right. Ram-Ram[31]."

"Ram-Ram."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Bhaiya detains me for the first time.

Intercepts me.

Of course we all eat together and watch T.V. together in proper togetherness. But today he has detained me, stepping forward. He invites me to his room. I glance at the clock — eight p.m. I climb the stairs behind him.

We reach his room.

"Come, sit down," he says and switches off the T.V. set. This means he has been here in this room all this while. Did he come down, then, just to ask me up?

Bhaiya's room is chic and bright. Two beds with sloping head rests. A side table. A lamp. Two cupboards matching the

walls. Cream coloured silk curtains with beige polka dots. A Hussain. A Picasso. A small T.V. table. On it a framed enlargement of Chintu and Mintu. The photograph reminds me of what I have to ask mother. I make a mental note of it.

"Do you know, this is the first time you've come into my room?"

The composure of his voice draws my attention again. And again my own scatteredness seems vast in contrast.

"I'd always thought, you,... that to you..."

"That to me you didn't matter. Isn't that what you want to say? Silly boy! It's only for mother's sake that I leave you alone. Misses you tremendously, the poor woman. If something you especially like is cooked she leaves it uneaten. You have, in all, eight days here, right? So why deprive mother of these eight days? We people anyway..."

Stay together, bhaiya means. He goes on:

"You've come for a very short time."

"It's long by their reckoning. Nobody thinks of taking time off in the middle of work. Just weekends..."

"Like it, coming here?"

"Why ever not?"

"Well. I just thought you'd got used to there, might not like it here. Immense prosperity they have over there. Has to be, has to be. Money can buy everything..."

Bhaiya is talking to me like an adult for the first time in my life. I don't really know what has given me this standing.

"It's nothing like that, really."

My answer is roundabout. He can't say whether it is to the first or the second part of his comments.

"The thing is, the moneyed are a class of their own. And the moneyless are a class of their own too! It's probably so for the whole world."

"What class are you in?" bhaiya prods.

"I am a beginner. It's just a beginning I've made. In every way a beginner."

Bhabhi comes in carrying two ornamental bowls. She smiles. Sweet. Insinuating. Swiftly she opens a cupboard and fills one bowl with cashewnuts, and the other with raisins.

And then she drags a stool close to me. It's as if I'm a rare personage who strayed onto their path.

"It's only now that you've come up here." She is bubbly and chirpy. Within the twinkling of an eye she gathers up her sari and sits cross-legged right in the middle of the bed, as if saying, there, she wasn't going anywhere now, she was at my service completely.

This is when I realise that it is all deliberate. Planned. They have something else up their sleeves.

"Talking about the cost of living here, it is so high that even dal and roti[32] is not humble food any more. Hard to come by. Over there, of course, you never feel the pinch?"

"No, money is hard to get there too. It doesn't grow on trees, as people imagine. It's not that you just have to shake the branches."

I explain to bhaiya hesitantly how very strange things are there. "You are turned out on the roads the day you are eighteen. Not like here where you can be a parasite with good conscience and stay cuddled in your father's lap till you're through with your M.A. and keep the family guessing about what you're going to do next!" It's a bit of a shock in the beginning, I tell him. "Parents and children seem over-harsh with each other, but they shrug it off. The meaning of education is the capacity to earn. The race begins early there."

"That's... that's why production is on the rise. There's so much circulating. And that's precisely why there's such comfort there." Bhaiya prostrates to Uncle Sam.

"I don't know about those things. But I see what a heartless slog it is there, to become anything, or do anything. And the things you lose in all the slogging, they just do not know. They're just not conscious of these things."

Bhabhi pulls up bhaiya. "Be more specific now. Suppose Mintoo goes there..."

"Then first he'll have to arrange for money to live on. Studies come after. Unless you give him money or send him money it'll be madness and next to impossible. Just get it clear, education means complete self-reliance over there. You

have to find your own shelter to bunk in, to begin with. Slogging is the other name for living, over there. That's why there's this dog-eat-dog competition." The thought occurs to me just now, in the heat of speaking.

When I say that higher education is not widespread there, bhaiya can't believe me.

The emphasis is on money-spinning education, I tell him. "And therefore," I turn oratorical, "Intellectuals, educational and writers are put on a pedestal."

Bhabhi's schoolmarm face lights up at this. But bhaiya takes no notice of it. He cuts into my lecture-mongering:

"It's been on our minds for a long time. Her brother, I mean, my brother-in-law... We've been thinking, why not send him there. If you sponsor him it'll be easy. Once he finds his feet, his folks can follow, you see. He just needs a lean-to, like Prashant was for you..."

I falter. "But bhaiya, I haven't found my own feet yet."

"Talk in relative terms now. It's hard currency there, all said and done. It'll always be thirty one times more than here. Right? I have a complete plan drawn up. I was waiting for a chance to discuss it with you. But these blessed PAC[33] meetings have kept me tied down ... And now your departure is at hand..."

Bhaiya is just not listening to me. If he is, he is not understanding me. A plan's been ripening in his mind for a long time. In the plan are the seeds of his dreams. The seeds will sprout and bear fruit if he just scatters them on this fertile piece of earth he knows of... this fertile piece where his own brother lives, what luck!

"Very well, tell me everything. I shall try. I'll write to you after reaching there, after weighing the pros and cons. Soon."

I add "soon" just to keep their spirits up. I cannot bear the collapsed look on their faces.

Bhabhi cheers him up.

"He is right. How was he to know that you had so much to talk about? And you break it to him just now when he is about to go. He can hardly see it whole!"

Bhaiya's bright room suddenly seems to be awash in dark

colours that won't let in light or warmth.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The scene is back.

Mother. Kamlee.

Courtyard. Flower beds. Shyamalee.

Chair. Wooden plank. Canister.

Rice. Sparrows. Platter.

Mother leaves the platter uncovered. When I pull her up she says, "Let it be. Let the birds pick and peck. How much will they eat? A pinch here, a pinch there."

The sparrows scatter grain and granules all around the platter.

Nothing stirs me. An inexplicable vacuum. Numbness. Spirits drooping. There's no throb of sound. No desire. No curiosity either. I feel suspended in the air.

Why did I come here? Why should I go there?

Is there any aim behind any action? Any direction?

Will I go to wash prints in a suffocating darkroom? From the hypo solution faces will emerge, one after the other. No emerging face will thrill or hold.

I shall get Martha. In full? Or in half? In haynph? Or with the threat of halving me by her crookedness?

I will get the studio. Robert. Robert and Martha. Bumping into each other behind the curtains of the dark room.

Or Happy Garment Store. Well away from the street facing the studio. Big, broad and spacious. Lights and lustre all day. Many floors. Many things. Select clientele. No jostling and teeming in America, see? No population explosion there.

Then will come night. And a cellar. Sometimes joined by Martha. Sometimes not. Mostly not. Mostly she sleeps in her apartment. Why don't I ever sleep in her apartment? Every right to every option Martha has appropriated for herself. Why? How?

At first there were no questions. Now there are nothing but questions. Staring questions without answers. Am I positioning myself at the mouth of a cannon?

Mother brings me to. "Quite right that your father calls you gawacha babu."

"What is that? Gawacha?"

"Means lost. Cuckoo. That's gawacha."

"And what do you call me?" I flare up.

"The same. Go on and stay gawacha. When I want to, awfully, I can call you. Invoke you. Though your father doesn't hold with such fancies."

"He wouldn't make the effort even if he did."

"That's not true. He's hard only from the outside, like a walnut. Inside...

I do not agree but let her take his side. I don't argue. Already my bones are stiff, as if from a cold wind.

"You make me angry but you worry me, too." Mother comes up to sit on the wooden plank.

"What is this? Divided all the time, half here half there..."

In a foul mood already, I get fouler. "Must you harp on that, for God's sake? Does it happen only to me? Never to others? Is anyone the same within and without? Hurry and scurry all around all the time, and home so far away..."

"But now you are here, in your home, your own home."

"O.K., but how am I to cut myself off from there and be here totally? Can anyone cut and divide like that? In geography and history books, yes. Can anyone cut his thinking into two? And it's not as if you don't know all this. Why do you nag me then? You here, and there Mar..."

I bite back with all my strength the name about to tumble out of my mouth.

Mother falls silent. She looks at me fixedly, without hurry.

"Tell me, does Martha also call you lost, dopey?"

I am under a microscope now. The focus upsets me, drives into me like a nail.

I am uneasy. Yes. Martha calls me dopey and worse. Goes on about it.

But I cannot tell Mother. When we live so far away what can I tell her? What kind of sympathy and sharing can there be?

I try to divert her. "Mother, listen..."

She refuses to be diverted. "I want to hear nothing else."

"What do you want to prove by this kind of talk? Just that I am split?"

Mother beats her knees with both her hands, looking hopeless. "What I want to prove or think is none of your business. Answer me first."

She waits a minute or two for an answer, and then drops her head between her knees. Now I can see the back of her head, shaped below the ravaged empire of her black and white hair.

"Why don't you sit on the chair?" I try to lighten her. "You've been on that wooden plank for hours."

"All right. I'll sit on a chair. You needn't try to placate me. If you don't want to tell, don't. Where am I to chase you to?"

She stands up. Her intensity shakes me, but I am unable to soften her. As always there's a vacuum within me. The power to please and supplicate, the desire for easing and making things simple, nothing is there.

Unable to gather my mind, I rely on my hands. I press her close to me. And I make her sit on my chair.

Seated, she is still restless. "And you?" Her face puckers.

"Aren't there more chairs in the house? I'll get one."

I go in and pick up a chair. Mintoo waylays me. "Chachaji[34], such a small calculator you've got for me. Next time, bring a bigger one. And also binoculars, chachaji, and camera and walkman and goggles and jeans..." He lengthens the list, frowning with concentration.

"All right, sure."

"Chachaji, when will you go?"

"Soon."

"Soon? But when? Tell me when!"

"Just three days more." I hold out three fingers and indicate the fourth day, the day of my departure.

He dodders up to me on his child's feet and wraps himself around me. I pick him up and come out into the courtyard. Mother isn't exactly pleased at the sight. Sore enough at my already unpresent presence in the house, this cuddling with the child makes her feel more left out.

Cuddling Mintoo, I go back with him into the house.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Mother does not follow me in. She continues to sit in the same place. It means she wants me out there with her. Just as I was before Mintoo caught me. Just as I had sat then, face to face.

I am not quite ready for a face to face. I'm not particularly thirsty for mother's love just now. I don't know whether it means satiation or the stealthy feet of approaching melancholia.

I pick up another chair and come out. I try to read Mother's face. There's a lot still unfinished between us.

Her face is vacant. She's laid a hand over her eyes against the dazzle of the sun.

Now the rice is far. The platter far. The picking forgotten. No more the mask of picking. She's there before me, all of her.

I plan my strategy while putting my chair in place. I simply seize the reins of conversation. "How little time Papa spends at home."

"Law is like that." She's terse at first, and then piles it on.

"You were to do your LLB. Then you were to take over from him. That was his scheme."

"All schemes don't have to materialise."

"Of course not." She is caustic and elaborates. "But like it or not, you are nothing separated from your own earth. How easy it is to live in your own country. Breathe the air in which you were born. Naturally. Unconsciously. No pressure. No tension. No new burdens, no new skills of survival to learn. Nothing new, nothing more."

"That means you sit around on your haunches all your life. No coming in, no going out."

"You know very well I'm not saying that. Go, certainly. But don't become one of them."

I know what mother is charging me with. But I have no weapons of defense.

A small incident comes to memory. On one of my birthdays there Mother had sent me a picture postcard of the goddess Sarasvati, with the inscription: "Your Nanaji[35] used to say that there is no destiny for anyone independent of his country. So struggle against the ill winds that cross your destiny, don't be blown off by them. Blessings from me and Papa."

The full meaning of those sentiments comes to me now, at this moment. Such sentiments have always been a part of her thoughts. That is why...

I am almost at the frontiers of limbo-land. But I haul myself back. Mother objects to these wanderings of mine. This sets me on a trail of self-reproach. Why do I knock repeatedly on doors out there? Why don't I remember that I am here, in my own home, my very own?

Which means I have no home there.

I never had one, no.

In spite of Martha and me being together, no home ever took shape.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"Go, certainly. But don't become one of them and stay put there."

Behind this sentence of hers is the clear and standing accusation that I have become one of them, become Martha's man. When the wife comes, the boundaries are drawn. The permanence called home is founded. Within the mind and outside it.

From mother's viewpoint, the home has been built, the permanence founded. Why should she think otherwise? I have so carefully given her no grounds to do so!

I now lay stress on my wish and my will, to convince mother.

"So besotted are you with your silly ideas of 'my country' and 'not my country,' mother, that you forget I wanted to marry Martha."

"You wanted to marry Shyamalee too."

It's a slap all right, hard, just where it hurts.

"Have you ever thought, if it had been Shyamalee you'd got married to you'd have remained part of this land? Marrying Martha, your life's course has changed. Country and clime have changed. A small thing, maybe, but the balance has tilted."

"You call it a small thing?" I rear up, shaken, and say the opposite of what I'd said minutes ago.

Maa goes on, blind to the contradiction.

"All right, not small, but the event is the same. And look at the effect. Distance. Distance, immeasurable..."

Mother's face scares me.

There's something about these sittings that put me in the dock. In the midst of solace and sympathy comes a sharp slap. One doesn't even have the nerve to rub the spot where the slap stings. It's like trying to hide your nakedness in an open courtyard.

Good thing the call for lunch goes.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Today I am firm that I shall talk about just one thing with mother. The photo. The matter keeps receding. Already the sweet, affection-filled atmosphere of that day when I talked about it the first time is waning. What a picture of love mother had looked that day! Raining warmth and care on my entire being!

But mother does not give me a chance. She catches me off guard, with a stern, no-nonsense look.

"Your incoherent talk and expression worry me." She takes the bull by the horns. "Your habit of brooding is not good. Especially if you are in a foreign country."

I do not get into an argument while Papa is around. I just want to glide along on the wheels of courtesy and propriety during the two weeks I am to be here.

Why hasn't Papa as much as hinted so far that my absence will affect his practice? If he had, some corner of my heart would have glowed. There's this about Papa. He accepts all

that happens. And he copes with it unsparingly afterwards. This is yet another truth which I have realised only now. In the house, mostly, he stays within his orbit. Possibly this self-contained silence was formed in the days when mother was working. I don't suppose sessions like those at Vaseem's ever took place here. Keeping busy has insulated intimacy.

"Agreed that your brooding head will always be on your shoulders. But lessen the brooding somehow. Otherwise I'm coming there, to you. I'll see for myself what's wrong. You haven't even offered to send me the ticket. Never mind, my provident fund money has been released."

I lose colour. I turn child in the effort to stay poised. "You are scolding me as you used to when I was a child. I haven't forgotten those days."

"What do you think, that I can't scold you now? I'll always have that right, my gawacha son. I'll have it even if you turn a hundred. I'm on my own there, got it?

She pulls my ear, tugs at it like a mother cat.

My courage grows. I drag her by her palloo, and bring her out to the courtyard. Now Papa is left out, left behind.

"You were going to sleep, weren't you? O.K. Now sleep when I'm gone. Tell me first, why have you removed my photo? Where have you put it? You haven't answered this simple question. Have you been to bhaiyya's room? Have you seen the enlargement of Chintoo and Mintoo he has made?"

"I have. To each his own. I'll do what I like with my son's photo. It's nobody's business. Not even yours."

"You mean I don't have a say about my own photo?"

"You don't." After a couple of seconds she says again, "You don't."

"If you don't tell me everything this time I'll stop speaking to you. I won't even ask. I'll just go, just take off, and you can cry your heart out."

"All right. I'll cry my heart out. What does it mean to you?"

She gets up listlessly and turns to go.

"Where are you going?"

Fear rises in me, slow, sinister.

"Nowhere," she says and begins pacing the courtyard. I

pace behind her, pleading in spite of myself. A pointless exercise. Mother neither looks round nor speaks.

Seeing all my shots go wide, I fling my last shot, my ultimate weapon.

"You just want me to come back, leaving Martha behind."

She seems to turn to stone and says in a strangled voice, "I want this? I can, you think? She hits herself hard on her breast to show me her "I." Her eyes are taut and wide.

"Then why don't you speak to me?" I go weepy.

"Finished? Over?"

Her face shudders and crumples out of shape. "I'll speak, all right, I'll speak... in just a little while... if speaking is really important. If I don't speak what else will I do, where will I go? But that for this one thing you'd give me such pain, such..."

She is gasping. The veins of her throat swell.

"So you will hear what I have to say? You want to hear? Glass. It had become just glass, your photo. Right under my eye. Just a frame, an iron frame without you. I'd put out my hand and the hardness of the glass would hit me, the bitch hardness. And do you know how cold the glass was? From here to here the cold bit."

Mother started from her fingertips and dragged her hands to her elbows.

"When I had to get you with my mind what use were these gee-gaws, tell me! These illusions, what was their use?"

Again, the sobbing laughter and the flood of tears climaxing. Dishevelled hair of no colour. Chest heaving. The face flogged with age, fearful to look at. She was laughing madly, unhinged.

"No, don't laugh. Don't laugh, mother. I tell you, don't laugh like that. What are you laughing at?'

"Then how should I laugh?" She stops, then bursts into tears. Against my shoulder. The moment stays frozen, like my hand on her head.

A long, wracking sob. The next minute she releases herself from the pressure of my hand.

The sky empties. Vacant. Fearsome.

What if it was glass? There was something behind the glass, someone. The someone was not glass. I am not glass.

I beg her. I shout. But I know that my shout is mute. Rattling in the veins of my throat, it does not become voice.

Going past me, mother stations herself in the doorway between the courtyard and the house. Distant. Estranged. I feel that under my very eye she will recede into a cave of her mind and stay there, become its denizen. She will neither see me, nor call me, nor await me.

When she steps away from the doorway she gathers the scattered grains of rice from the ground. She puts them in the corner of the flower bed. She puts the rice back in the canister. Wipes the platter with her bare hand, and then picks up the wooden plank and puts it back against the wall in its usual place.

In every move she makes there is a frightful finality. Camps are breaking up. Camps to where and from where? Who, what, is in the camps?

Within me gathers dread.

Mother picks up the canister and begins going in, into the house.

From the blubber and strangle of my throat a scream bursts: "No-o-o-o- Mother, No! Don't go!"

What does mother know of the replay of the scene within me? Terror returns with long strides. In my belly is THAT, the gargantuan hole. Sprawling. Crushing my ribs hard, hard. Into its jaws Martha had spread her body and saved me. In the cold pitch darkness, for a minute, like a star, she had come alive, not Martha but a presence.

If the senses are seeking to hide in a soft, fluid darkness such as in the womb, who can help me? Who? Who can? Any mother? Sister? Sweetheart? Friend? Who? Desperation knows no name or form or relationship. It wants a presence. The bounty of presence. Only that allness.

Ah. Mother looks behind her. Her eyes and cheeks are streaming.

"Give the canister to me, mother. Such a heavy canister! Couldn't you call me?"

"I often forget that you are here. Often."

We have crossed the doorway and come in. We brace ourselves to face all those within. I console mother.

"Forget the old one. I'll send you a new photo, a perfect one, as soon as I get there. You won't have to put it behind glass. You can touch it whenever you want to. You'll love it."

"I will? You'll send me your photo? Haven't I told you?" She stops. "What am I to do with your photo?'

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Now there are only today and tomorrow left. I am to leave at the crack of dawn the day after tomorrow. At three o'clock in the morning.

Coming here with Vaseem, I'd never have thought that I'd be this way, too. Thinking of staying back. Allowing that fissure to open within me.

Everybody is far busier than me in the preparations. Mother is tying up parcels and tins for me to take. Papa is hovering around. He hasn't gone anywhere, nor said anything. Bhaiya is rapt. Bhabhi is dancing attendance on me. Mintoo fawns. Kamlee just watches, goggle-eyed.

If I am quizzed about my reasons for staying there, or coming here, I'd be driven to real soul-searching. Why did I stay on there all this while? For shame at returning "unsuccessful?" For being entangled with Martha? A soiled, unclean feeling? A clinging hope that the next day would be better? Or dollars?

But none of this is of any real importance now. There's neither desire nor the inspiration to go. The saddled war-weary horse is unsaddled, wanting rest. Longing for affection, warmth, things it hasn't had for ages.

Vaseem's phone call has come. "The Lufthansa flight is at three in the morning. That means reaching the International Airport at eleven p.m. And that means Delhi at ten o'clock. But I'll get in at nine, just to avoid the unforeseen. I'll be expecting you at the check-in counter."

Vaseem sounds mighty happy. All gurgly and chirpy. The

clouds, so menacing, have passed without thunder. The sky is clear now, he says, and full proof of sunshine. And yes, a surprise. "You'll have your meeting with Nusrat too. And listen, if she begins to get mopey and weepy turn your face away. I don't want you ogling her while she's crying away. She cries easily. Soft as butter her heart is. She'll be in a sky blue gharara kurta dress. Remember that and you'll recognise her."

So it's all settled there, down to dress and colour.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The night just passed, I didn't sleep a wink. And they pushed me to bed early. The argument was that a good night's rest was necessary. The next day I'd be pooped out. And the daily grind will begin on the day of landing. What did I think, that they didn't know what it was like there, in America?

I keep getting pushed. I dwell again and again on my wish to stay back. But like silvery drops of mercury splashed on the floor the wish keels forward each time I try to hold it.

Before being packed off to sleep, a heavy dinner. Innumerable dishes. Innumerable pieces of advice. Worries. Demands for letters. Gifts for Martha with doubts about her taste.

A lot of overt love. Mother's silence. All this would vanish by the day after tomorrow.

My bleached eyes, sleep-drained. I have spent the night on the verandah; in front of me is the door opening out to the terrace. A window high above.

The clack-clack of the night watchman's stick. Police patrols. Whistles. Dogs. In the grey-white light of a morning not yet broken, the buildings come into view like black domes. Birds. The bells of the temple. The azaan[36] of the moulvi[37]. Clatter of milk cans. The squeaks and thuds of the front door opening. I hear it all. Hear it again and again.

Morning breaks into unslept eyes. Now — nothing. No chance to reverse anything. Now I'll have to go to Martha's country. Everybody is ready, out to make me sick with their warmth.

Even till breakfast a partial hope clings to me. A statement

of intents keeps brewing in me. Then I grow weary storing intents. There has to be a viable reason for storing them. All the viable reasons are weighted in favour of going. The biggest of the reasons — my green card. Hard to get. Precious beyond words. The ultimate lure. Now the sole arbiter of my destiny.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Now I have to go.

Not "I," but me. The son. The brother. The brother-in-law. The uncle. The Kunwar Saheb. All these I's will have to liquify and become — one. Just one. A dog. Tongue lolling at Martha's door. Crushed between a low ceiling and the foul smell of fried eggs. Treated to stealthy gasps and pantings from behind the curtains. If Martha is no pledged wife to me, she can be that to anyone or no-one. She has the right to empty out her womb again and again, again and again. The supreme right.

How silent all of them are! So silent? Why doesn't anyone ask me, "Why are you going there?" Framed in the archways of glory they picture me, but do not see me.

Mother has learnt to waken her mind, free it of idols. When my photo was around, I, too, was around here somewhere. I was at least visible. Maybe a country bumpkin to some, but precious — to mother at least.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

There, it's ten o'clock. I go now.

There. I am going, Mintoo. If I don't, where will your basket of things come from?

There, I'm off bhaiya. The sack of seeds in your hands, the seeds of your dreams. How will you get your piece of earth for your dream seeds if I don't go?

There, I go, bhabhi. Keep the fragrance of poories to yourself. I'll make do with hamburgers.

Mother, here I go. You've learnt to waken your mind.

There, Shyamalee, I go. The beds are all dug.

I go, Papa. You've said everything there was to say, once and for all.

I go, country. I never did see, hear, or touch you. I longed forever in vain to hold you by the hand. The hand I have to hold now is Martha's.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

There, I come, Vaseem. I have a return ticket.

And here, Martha, I come.

To your country.

I don't know why.

Narrative one

1. maasi : mother's sister.
2. chhokris : minxes.
3. sasuraal : husband's household.
4. shatranj : Indian chess.
5. yaar : a colloquial expression to address a dear and fast friend.
6. sanskaras : the moral-spiritual code that devolves upon a man from the full load of his deeds in all his past births.
7. mamaji : maternal uncle.
8. ghee : clarified butter.
9. Shrimati, Shri : honorifix.
10. saheb : an upper-class gentleman, a term of respect.
11. chivda : a snack.
12. Vaman : the Dwarf (Vishnu in disguise) who grew to cosmic proportions when he spanned the whole of the universe with his 'dwarf's' feet.
13. Shrimaanji : a slightly satirical Hindi word for Mr.
14. kheer : thickened and sweetened milk, like custard.

Narrative two

1. bhaiya : brother.
2. bhabhi : brother's wife, sister-in-law.
3. nikah : the Muslim marriage ceremony.
4. abba : Muslim term for father.
5. sehras : the veil of flowers that covers the bridegroom's face during the wedding ceremonies, among both Hindus and Muslims.

6. Raja Janak's bow : the great bow which King Janak, the father of Sita (Rama's wife) got from Lord Shiva. No man except Lord Rama could even lift it.
7. izzat : self respect.
8. talaaq : divorce.
9. poories : round, flattened balls of dough that puff up when deep fried in ghee or oil.
10. pallaa : the outer end of the sari left loose down the left or right shoulder.
11. sooji : broken wheat.
12. kaansaa : an alloy of five metals, used for utensils.
13. halva : a sweet dish of broken wheat, milk, butter and sugar.
14. didi : elder sister.
15. karaunda : a sour tasting berry, made into a pickle, or added to other pickles.
16. thali : a flat metal tray.

17. sadhus : wandering mendicants.
18. maali : gardener.
19. bahu jee : usually daughter-in-law, but also means as here, the lady of the house.
20. pooja : ceremony of worship.
21. Lakshman rekha : an invisible line beyond which one does not act or proceed. Reference is to the actual line that Lakshman, Lord Rama's brother, drew around Sita instructing her, for her own safety, not to step beyond it.
22. deysh : Hindi word for country.
23. karhi : a dish of spiced yogurt and gram flour.
24. dhobi : washerman.
25. bulbul : nightingale.
26. sevaian : the Indian form of noodles.
27. paanwalla : seller of paan, a preparation of betel leaves filled with aromatic spices and nuts.

28. samosa : a deep fried snack made of refined flour with filling inside.
29. jalebi : a sweet, soaked in syrup.
30. banaarsi paan : a special sweet paan.
31. Ram-Ram : a form of greeting.
32. dal and roti : the traditional, staple food of North India, consisting of lentil mash and unleavened bread.
33. PAC : Public Accounts Committee.
34. chachaji : paternal uncle.
35. nanaji : maternal grandfather.
36. azaan : the Muslim priest's words calling the faithful to prayer.
37. moulvi : Muslim priest.

TITLES IN THIS SERIES

Bengali	:	**Woodworm** **Subarnalata**
Gujarati	:	**Henceforth** **Rear Verandah** **Crumpled Letter**
Hindi	:	**The Song of the Loom** **Unarmed**
Kannada	:	**Bharathipura** **Gendethimma**
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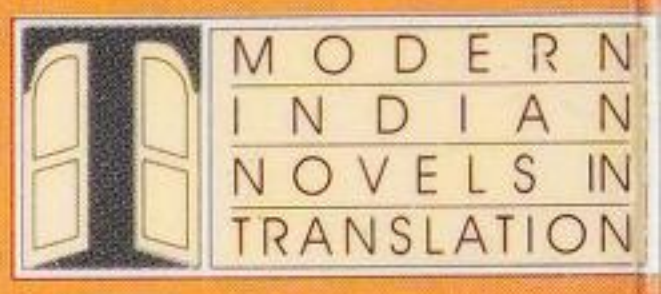

The securities we so revel in – our knowledge of ourselves, the measure we have of people, even the life we live – are shown up as fragile in the circumstances in which the young protagonists of these twin narratives find themselves. Vishaal cannot comprehend how little it has taken to fell the seemingly invincible Basu; the expatriate in the second story grapples with his own schisms when thrown into an alien culture. The memories that sustain us, often turn burdensome. Wisdom, perhaps, is the price we pay for the loss of innocence.

Rajee Seth (1935) has degrees in literature, comparative religion and philosophy. She is a short-story writer, novelist, poet, critic and essayist, has won several awards for her contribution to Hindi literature and translated into Hindi a collection of Rilke's letters that focus on the theme of creativity.

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